JOHN
TAINE
THE CRYSTAL HORDE
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THE CRYSTAL HORDE
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SCIENCE
FICTION
JOHN TAINE

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THE CRYSTAL HORDE

by John Taine

Author of "Seeds of Life", "The Forbidden Garden", "The Iron Star", etc.

SOMETHING was moving about the house. It was not alive, nor was it being propelled. Yet it moved. That is the beginning of one of the most engrossing science novels ever to appear in print. Charged with thrills and suspense, it grips and holds your attention from the very first word.

When Captain Robert Lane of the U. S. Marines leaves for the Orient on the day before Easter, he has no idea that his young wife and four-year-old son are to become involved in a conflict far more deadly than the one in which he is to engage, a war older than the human race. Nor does he realize that he himself is potentially the most dangerous man in the world.

"The Crystal Horde" begins with an Easter egg, a storage egg dyed a virulent green, and it concludes with one of the most tremendous—and unique—battles ever conceived by the mind of man. The body of the tale is made up of action and mystery, beginning in California and moving from there to the interior of China.

Written by Dr. E. T. Bell of the California Institute of Technology (who writes science fiction as "John Taine"), "The Crystal Horde" displays the author's customary ingenuity and originality in dealing with the unusual. In marked contrast with the otherworldly menace which supplies the basic plot of the story is the array of all-too-human characters. Dr. Saxby, who collects earthquakes, is definitely not a conventional science fiction scientist. He might well be one of Dr. Bell's colleagues. You will be interested in meeting Hu the Good and his daughter, White Lily; the communist agents, Markoff and Liapanouff; and other ordinary and extraordinary people.

It is worth noting that, although "The Crystal Horde" cannot be called a satire in any sense of the word, Dr. Bell was unable to resist completely the thrusting of a satiric scalpel into some of the infected areas of modern society—and on occasion giving it a not-too-gentle twist!

"The Crystal Horde," to summarize, is adult, literate reading fare—entertaining and throught-provoking, and written with the skill you'd expect to find in the work of an author who has produced twenty-five reasonably successful books.

Decorations and Jacket Design by Hannes Bok

FANTASY PRESS
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Another Excellent Science Novel
For Your Entertainment

SEEDS OF LIFE

By JOHN TAINE

THOUGHT of the atomic bomb and what exposure to its radiations might do has excited the imagination of thinking men and women everywhere.

"John Taine" (who is Dr. E. T. Bell of the California Institute of Technology) has permitted his imagination to investigate some of the possibilities in a similar fascinating theme. This is *not* a story involving the atomic bomb, however. Atomic energy is part of the story, but only an incidental part, as are such unlikely ingredients as a black widow spider, a two-million volt X-ray tube, chicken eggs which hatch out reptilian monsters, and other equally strange plot threads. Dr. Bell has again displayed his usual ability to write about the unusual.

When Dr. Andrew Crane of the Erickson Foundation tries to make a man of Neils Bork, his laboratory assistant, whose interest in bottled inspiration is his chief weakness, he succeeds in a spectacular manner. Bork himself contributes to the end result in his bungling way, and there emerges Miguel De Soto, a superman in every sense of the word. His rate of thinking and perceiving has accelerated many thousand times beyond that of any human being who has ever lived. He is a partial, accidental anticipation of the race man may be destined to become in the millenniums ahead.

"Seeds of Life" is science fiction of a high order, a novel involving believable people in unusual situations. It is written in the smoothly entertaining style which characterizes all of Dr. Bell's work, including such well-known books as "The Magic of Numbers," "Mathematics, Queen and Servant of Science," and his many "John Taine" science novels. And it is adult reading fare, realistic, gripping and informative. Above all it is good entertainment. Price $2.75.

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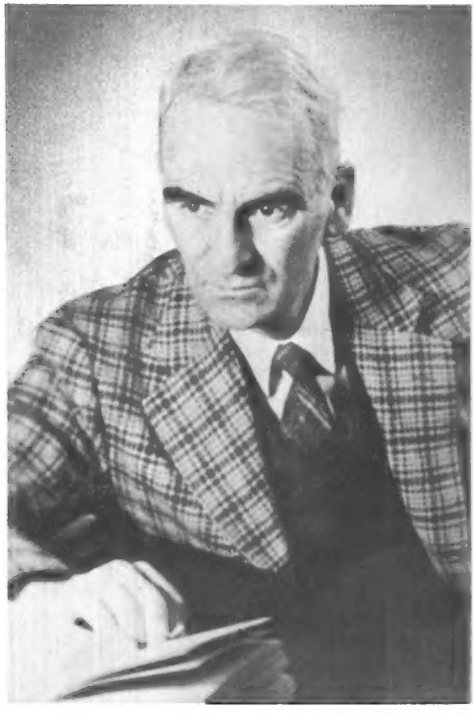
About John Taine



JOHN Taine, famous for his science novels ever since his Tibetan romance, "The Purple Sapphire" was published in 1924, is the prominent research mathematician, Dr. E. T. Bell. Under his own name he has had published several popular books on what he describes as "the less inhuman aspects of mathematics and science, for example, mathematicians." These books include "Man and His Lifebelts," "The Magic of Numbers," "Mathematics, Queen and Servant of Science," and others. He has also written several serious works on mathematics, as well as more than two hundred papers of a purely technical nature.

Dr. Bell was born in Peterhead, Scotland, on February 7, 1883. After attending various schools in England, he came to the United States (of which he is a naturalized citizen) in 1902, entering Stanford University in the fall of 1902, and graduating in 1904. There he specialized in mathematics, and in 1907 was a teaching fellow at the University of Washington, where he took his Master's degree. In the academic year 1911-12 he attended Columbia University, taking his doctor's degree in mathematics.

Since 1926 he has been Professor of Mathematics at California Institute of Technology. He is a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; the American Mathematical Society; the Mathematical Association of America (of which he is past-president); Circolo Matematico di Palermo; Calcutta Mathematical Society; and the National Academy of Science.

Dr. Bell devotes most of his time to mathematics, teaching and research. Science fiction is one of his hobbies; research in mathematics leaves little time for fiction writing. Despite this, John Taine has appeared as Author of fourteen published science novels, and has written several others which have not yet seen print. His most ambitious work, a tremendous narrative poem begun in 1909 and completed in 1949, fills more than 700 pages of typescript. This poem, called "The Scarlet Night," has not yet been published.

John Taine's science fiction is distinctive for its originality and plausibility. Even his wildest flights of fancy are convincing, due, in part, to his powerful portrayal of natural phenomena, as well as the fact that his characters are real people.

THE CRYSTAL HORDE

TAINE

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The Crystal Horde

By the Same Author:

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(Science Fiction)

The Purple Sapphire, 1924
Quayle's Invention, 1927
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The Greatest Adventure, 1929
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The Forbidden Garden, 1947
The Cosmic Geoids, 1949
Seeds of Life, 1951
The Crystal Horde, 1952

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Algebraic Arithmetic, 1927
The Development of Mathematics, 1940

(Quasi-Mathematical Books of General Interest)

Debunking Science, 1927
The Queen of the Sciences, 1931
Numerology, 1933
The Search for Truth, 1934
The Handmaiden of the Sciences, 1937
Men of Mathematics, 1937
Man and His Lifebelts, 1938
The Magic of Numbers, 1946
Mathematics, Queen and Servant of Science, 1951

JOHN TAINE

The Crystal Horde

Decorations by Hannes Bok

FANTASY PRESS
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CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	FOUNDERED	9
2	WHAT THE RATS SAW .	24
3	SAXBY'S EXPERIMENT	35
4	YANG'S DINNER .	52
5	WHITE LILY	71
6	HU'S FOLLY	86
7	THE DRAGON .	. 106
8	LANE'S CARDS .	. 125
9	MARKOFF'S THEFT	. 140
10	PAID .	. 153
11	BURIED	. 172
12	FROM THE GRAVE	. 190
13	CONFLICT	. 207
14	VICTORY	. 230
15	SHOPPING	. 244

The Crystal Horde

FOUNDERED

SOMETHING WAS MOVING ABOUT THE HOUSE. It was not alive, nor was it being propelled. Yet it moved. Such was the flesh raising impression Mrs. Lane got first as she started up in bed and groped for the electric lamp. Her fingers moved without feeling over the small table by the head of the bed, upset a tumbler of water, and found nothing. The house was as still as the crypt of an unviolated pyramid, and as dark.

Failing to find the lamp, Mrs. Lane remembered with ghastly exactness where she had left it. Too tired to read that night before going to sleep, as was her custom during her husband's numerous absences on duty, she had left the lamp on the dressing table by the door, a good ten feet from the bed.

Should she prove that she was a soldier's wife by getting out of bed and turning on the light, or would it be more prudent to acknowledge that she was just an extremely frightened young woman, and bury her head under the pillow? Instinctively she breathed her husband's name, "Bob!" as if her extreme terror could pierce a hundred miles of darkness and recall instantly her natural protector.

Captain Robert Lane, asleep on the U. S. transport *Sheridan* rushing him and his marines to Shanghai, dreamed neither of his

wife nor of his four-year-old son, but of hordes of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary Chinese locked in civil war. Lane's task was to be no part of a "police action", like the start of the Korean conflict, but a more or less routine expedition to Kansu province to rescue marooned missionaries. While the forces of the United Nations were engaged elsewhere, northwest China had erupted in civil war. Factions of fanatics sought to exterminate one another, till the war became a confused anarchy. And always in the councils of the combatants skilled agents from Moscow deftly and impartially betrayed one faction to another. Smouldering and almost forgotten hatreds were fanned into flame; no opportunity for stirring up strife was neglected by the highly trained experts. Religious differences were among the most easily manipulated. Where Buddhists and Mohammedans and Christians had let one another live in peace, were now three intolerant sects on the verge of open strife. And squarely in the place of greatest danger the missionaries whom Lane's men were to rescue huddled praying for deliverance. To many of these men and women, Chinese was a readier tongue than the English they were forgetting. Yet they were hated by the Chinese they had given the best years of their lives to help. The agents were more effective instructors than the missionaries. In a matter of months they nullified the teaching of years.

Lane as a rule was a sound and dreamless sleeper. Possibly it was the pitching of the transport, or subconscious worry about his mission, that was responsible for his nightmare. A cruel Chinese face without head or body behind it swam like a saffron bladder toward the captain's; a pair of dead eyes fastened with cold hatred upon his own; the slit that was a mouth in the yellow, floating thing opened as if to spit a curse, and Bob Lane turned over with a groan, his nightmare broken, but not by his young wife's horror of the clammy darkness that clung to her like a shroud.

Why had the black silence of her bedroom suddenly taken on an unearthly chill? Surely the air was drifting slowly over

the bed, and flowing silently into the other room where her son slept in his cot.

"I must see! I must see!" Mrs. Lane muttered to herself, not daring to put her foot to the floor and slip out of bed. "I'm not a coward." She spoke the words aloud, as if challenging the sooty cold to deny an obvious truth. Then an impersonal being, a passionless embodiment of the primitive, unaging logic of things material, spoke with the terrified woman's voice. "There is something in that room," it whispered, "that is neither dead nor living. It is not a spirit, for it never breathed. I know this is true, because I feel it. Whatever is in that room is trying to live, but does not yet know how." Mrs. Lane recovered her mental balance. "Nonsense!" she commented tersely, but without conviction.

The voice that had spoken was the forgotten danger signal of an all but eradicated instinct, so early rooted in the very tissues of life that its existence has passed unsuspected for ages. When the first uncouth parodies of living things took shape in the primeval slime, that same voice uttered its already ancient warning to the crystals and colloids that blundered their slow way toward life and evolution. Age after age that secular fear had whispered, to remind the nascent races of plants and animals how precarious was their grasp upon the fleeting dream called life, and how insecure their temporary dominion over death.

"It is an accident, no more, that you, not I, have life," the nameless instinct seemed to whisper, speaking for the uncreated lives behind the fear; "yet, in the end, my kind shall destroy your kind."

Mrs. Lane had at last recovered her courage. "I shall find my slippers and see what it is," she declared, making no move to carry out her intention.

"Mother! Mother!"

The terrified scream of young Tom cut through her indecision like a razor. Instinct shot Mrs. Lane out of bed, through the icy darkness, into her small son's room. Isabel Lane was

twenty-five, healthy and supple. She had not tarried over her slippers. Whatever might be in her boy's room, inhuman monster or mere burglar, might expect no more than swift and painful justice from her tense fingers.

"What is it? Oh——!"

Before she could switch on the electric light, it—whatever it may have been—had happened, appallingly, horribly. There was a crash, a multiplied, incredible crash, of falling, splintering glass, as if a massive old-fashioned ballroom chandelier had shattered itself on the floor. That was all. Not even a subsiding tinkle of fragment on broken fragment lent coherence to the insane dream. There was no chandelier or gaudier hanging abomination of glass in the house, much less in the boy's bedroom.

She snapped on the light. Was it all a nightmare? Then why had her son screamed, in the utter extremity of unnatural terror, and why was he now crying so lustily? She could not believe her dazed eyes. On the smooth oak floor she saw absolutely nothing, not even a trace of impalpable dust. And yet, with her own ears, she had heard the thing—whatever it may have been—fall. Not only had she heard it crash to destruction; the sound of its sudden dissolution was but the momentary echo of a definite, prolonged and terrible death. The thing, now dead and invisible, had gone out in agony. Only its pain lingered.

The boy, crying in her arms, could tell her nothing. "I'm afwaid, I'm afwaid," was all he could say to express an emotion which might have baffled the most subtle of psychologists to analyze. The fear, which chilled him no less than his mother, was older than instinct, more ancient than the human race. The insentient cells of his young body, the inert minerals of his bones and the traces of iron in his blood had answered to the immemorial fear which all living beings experienced when first they gained, by a hazardous survival, the right to live. That right was now, after unnumbered millions of years, being challenged by a forgotten enemy, whose defeat in the beginning of

creative time made the miracle of life an unexplained reality.

Still but half awake, in spite of the sudden shock to her nerves, Mrs. Lane had a cold, clear knowledge that the vanished anomaly—she did not call it this, because she was too dazed, nor did she account for her crystal intuition—had perished in its first, infantile attempt to walk. A subdued, all but inaudible sound of stealthy motion stole back through the silence of her memory, and she seemed to recall that the darkness before the crash had not been a dead nothing, but a stifled clamor of pain and abortive movements. The tentative, almost forgotten sounds of the motion of the thing, before it crashed and dissolved into nothing, were strangely like those of a baby venturing its first steps.

All of these impressions were on a deeper level than that of memory or intuition. They were immediate knowledge, such as mystics claim to experience, conveyed directly from one material thing to another. Mind did not speak to mind, but matter to matter. That silent message of fear in the night was more ancient than any mind. What misshapen mistake of time had found its way up through the darkness of forgotten ages, only to blunder in its first crude movements to an agonized death, in search of the light it could not reach? For the thing suffered an equivalent of pain, although it had no mind; the intensity of its agony still congealed the silent air and froze in the memory of its end. That also was immediate experience, a thing not known or sensed, but lived, from one dead atom to another. Whose careless hand had flung back the bolts shutting off this half-created thing from the life it dumbly coveted?

Mrs. Lane, deciding to consider the incident a nightmare, although fast within her bones she felt that it had been singularly real, carried the boy back to her own bed and soon had him asleep. She herself could not sleep. To establish her courage she switched off the lamp, now restored to its usual place on the table by her bed, and debated whether she should get out in the dark to put the lamp back upon the dresser, just to prove

conclusively that she was not afraid. Prudence conquered, and she cuddled up to her son. There might be another nightmare—she carefully avoided giving the disturber of her sleep any more tangible designation—in the house, and she did not wish to be unprepared for emergencies. The sense of a nameless fear, and with it the unaccountable chill, had definitely departed, as if the cause of the "nightmare" were indeed dead and less than dust.

Shortly before daybreak she began to doze off. How long she lost touch with the world of living things, Mrs. Lane cannot guess, but she imagines it was less than three-quarters of an hour. She awoke with a start, feeling that she was about to be strangled. A faint but unmistakable odor of corruption tainted the air. A brilliant oblong of sunlight on the floor of her boy's room at once caught her eye through the door which she had left wide open. Tom was fast asleep at her side, apparently in perfect health, although he breathed somewhat loudly. Instantly alert, his mother noticed in almost the same glance that the patch of sunlight shone with a peculiar brilliance, and that her boy's upper lip, where the breath from his nostrils played over it, was discolored a distinct yellow. Her first thought, although she could give no logical reason for it, was that the kitchen gas range was aleak and filling the house with deadly carbon monoxide.

Not stopping to verify any leaks, she rushed out of doors with Tom. Then she returned to fling open all the doors and windows of the bungalow. Everywhere that faint breath of decay poisoned the air, most noticeably in those rooms brightened by the early morning sun, barely perceptible in those where the sun had not yet penetrated, and just distinguishable in the dark closets.

It was still but a very few minutes after sunrise. Moreover, it was a Sunday morning—Easter Sunday at that. It was out of the question to call a plumber or a man from the gas company to examine the range. Mrs. Lane, resourceful as are most women whose husbands must be away from home half of their lives,

took the Fire Department into her confidence and appealed for help. The man on duty yawning at the other end of the wire promised to send two men immediately. While the help was on its way, Mrs. Lane had time to get Tom and herself partially but presentably dressed.

The two firemen who came to render first aid were skeptical, not to say cynical. They nosed about with a sophisticated air, found nothing wrong, and said so plainly.

"Last night the first your husband was away?" one of them asked to corroborate Mrs. Lane's story as she had told it.

She acknowledged that it was, but added that being alone was nothing unusual in the life of an army officer's wife.

"You've got a fit of nerves, that's all," the fireman assured her. "Get one of the neighbor women to stay with you tomorrow night. There's no gas leaking here."

"Very well," she replied, feeling a little foolish. Then suddenly she experienced a sharp sense of danger, and decided to tell the men all about the "nightmare," which till now she had not mentioned. The firemen listened respectfully, with not more grinning than might pass unrebuked. But when the agitated young mother concluded her recital with a frankly feminine appeal that one of the men look under the cot in her boy's room, they burst into a guffaw.

"All right, lady," they agreed, "we're game."

When they saw the cot, standing about three feet high, with a rare Mexican valance of woven horsehair concealing its legs, they roared. The thought that any burglar or other beast of prey could secrete himself successfully under a baby's bed proved too much for their sense of humor. Nevertheless they had promised to rescue a distressed mother, and they now stuck like firemen to their word. One on either side they got down on all fours and poked their heads under the hanging valance, still gurgling like young bulls with repressed mirth. Then suddenly they collapsed and stiffened. Mrs. Lane dragged their unconscious bodies out to the veranda and telephoned for a doctor.

The men recovered before the doctor arrived.

"What hit me, Joe?"

"What hit *me?*" his companion countered. "Did you get it, too?"

"I sure did. Say, lady, I guess you were right about the gas. It must still be hanging about the floor."

"But you said all the fixtures are in perfect shape," Mrs. Lane demurred. "It can't be the gas."

"What was there under that kid's bed, then?" one of the men demanded suspiciously. "I ain't knocked clean out by nothing."

"There was nothing under the cot that I know of. Unless," she added as an afterthought, "you count an egg."

"An egg? What kind of an egg?"

"Just an egg—an Easter egg. I hid one of the dozen we colored yesterday under my boy's cot, for him to find this morning."

"Oh, so it's just an Easter egg breakfast you've invited us to?" the fireman queried sarcastically. "It struck Joe and me like a bartenders' picnic. What brand of eggs do you use in your business, anyway?"

"Hen's eggs, of course. Did you notice if the green one was under the cot?"

"The green one!" Joe echoed disgustedly. "Say, what are you handing us? I've a good notion to call a cop."

Joe was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor.

"You are too late, fortunately," Mrs. Lane explained. "The men are better."

In answer to the doctor's queries, Mrs. Lane and the firemen succeeded in giving him a confused impression of a wild Saturday night party unduly prolonged into Easter Sunday. Although too suave a gentleman to express his suspicions openly on so delicate a matter, the doctor privately diagnosed the trouble as a mild case of alcoholism. Still, he admitted to himself, Mrs. Lane looked all right; and the firemen exhaled no telltale odor.

"Perhaps I had better see for myself what is under your boy's bed," he suggested, with just the right inflection to indicate that he suspected Mrs. Lane of hysteria.

"Watch him get his," Joe whispered.

"Is the green egg there?" Mrs. Lane inquired expectantly, as the doctor lifted the horsehair valance to peer under the cot. "Why," she exclaimed to herself, "what's become of the floor mat?"

"Green egg?" the doctor echoed incredulously in a dazed voice. "You——."

Then he too collapsed. When he revived in the cool air of the veranda, he was somewhat dazed and quite crestfallen.

"There must be gas on the floor," he declared. "Is there a connection for a heater in that room?"

The firemen assured him that there was not. As experts, they agreed that escaping gas had nothing to do with the case.

"Did you see the green egg?" Mrs. Lane persisted. She had an obscure, half-formed intuition, which she would not have trusted to words for any bribe, that some evil thing had hatched out of that innocent looking Easter egg in the night, and was now polluting the clean morning air with its unholy, nocturnal exhalations.

"What green egg?" the doctor demanded, consciously hearing of its existence for the first time.

Mrs. Lane explained in detail. Intuition, mother instinct, or whatever we may choose to call supersense, prompted her to be explicit. The egg, she felt, was not so innocent as most eggs usually are. But she did not confide her suspicions to the three men. As yet her doubts were too nebulous to be taken seriously.

"Just an ordinary hen egg?" the doctor quizzed with a disappointed air when she finished her story. "Sure it wasn't a bad one?"

"It may have been," she admitted. "You see, it was a storage egg. The other eleven that we dyed were guaranteed fresh laid."

"Ah!" the doctor exclaimed, brightening. "That explains this mysterious odor that you say you noticed."

"Odor nothing," Joe interjected decisively. "Did you ever see three healthy men knocked out by one bad egg?"

"But you say it isn't gas," the doctor agreed. "Suppose we have a look at that egg—if there is one." He rose, deliberately cut off a long pole of green bamboo from the clump by the steps, and proceeded to Tom's bedroom. Half ashamed of their expectant curiosity, the three watched the doctor fish under the cot for the guilty egg. Standing bolt upright as he cautiously explored the floor with the pole, the doctor took no chances of encountering a second gas attack. Presently his persistence was rewarded. Out trundled a beautiful, grass-green Easter egg.

"Don't touch it!" he ordered. "The thing may be poisoned. I don't half like its color. Is there a shovel about the place?"

Mrs. Lane fetched the garden shovel, and the doctor, accompanied by the gaping firemen, gingerly bore the suspected egg out of doors.

As he tipped the egg off the shovel, a fourth spectator joined the charmed circle. This was Hoot, the Lanes' enormous yellow family cat. From what region of space he now materialized himself is not known; he just appeared, as he always did, when interesting events were about to happen.

"Don't let him sniff it!" Mrs. Lane implored.

But the doctor, acting in the interests of impartial science, gently restrained her and let curiosity earn its reward. His own curiosity was piqued. The firemen were content to permit the doctor to handle the case. Like Hoot and the doctor they too were now imbued with the scientific spirit.

Hoot's elaborate caution in attacking the problem availed him nothing. First one testing paw patted the egg and found it docile, then the other. It was safe, according to the cat's expert judgment, and would not bite him. Very delicately he elongated his neck and sniffed the virulent looking green shell. He received worse than a bite. With a dismal, croaking howl, as if

he were about to be deathly sick, he staggered groggily away, to sink down in a heap at his mistress' feet.

"Poor Hoot," Mrs. Lane exclaimed, picking up the limp form. "Never mind; you'll soon recover—the doctor and the firemen did. Tom! Keep away from that egg."

She rescued her son just as his four-year-old curiosity was about to overmaster him. One of the practical firemen seized the shovel.

"Don't smash it!" the doctor snapped, knocking the poised shovel aside. "That's the most interesting egg in California. Poisoned, beyond a doubt." A wavering blotch of sunlight played over the villainous egg as the leaves of the walnut danced in the morning breeze, and the doctor continued his theorizing. "Look at that vile color. Did you ever see so hideous a green? Something new in the way of poisonous dyes, I'll wager. It isn't a copper green, nor yet an arsenic. I'm going to have it analyzed by the city chemist."

"Yeh," Joe agreed, "it's sure poisoned. Well, we've got to be getting back to the station. Good morning, everybody."

The doctor stood doubtfully regarding the egg. How pick it up safely?

"Of course you will destroy the rest of the eggs you dyed?" he suggested.

Mrs. Lane nodded. "Have you any idea what kind of poison it is?"

"It acts like concentrated carbon monoxide *plus* hydrocyanic acid, but I doubt whether it is. Otherwise that cat would probably be dead. And he's not."

As if to confirm the doctor's verdict, the supine Hoot made a heroic effort to throw off his stupor. The huge cat rolled over in his mistress' arms and deftly wriggled his way to freedom.

"Keep away from that egg!" the doctor warned, as Hoot made a beeline for the enemy. "Isn't once enough?"

Before they could catch him, Hoot was gratifying his instinct for scientific research. The full, strong sunlight had now been

bathing the bright green egg for several minutes. The cat sniffed once, tentatively, then again, thoroughly. Nothing happened. With an air of intense disappointment the enormous Hoot turned his back on the contemptible enemy that was too proud to fight, and stalked away on his morning business.

For a moment the poison hypothesis seemed to have exploded. Then the doctor hit upon the obvious explanation. His simple theory was in perfect accord with sound common sense. It's one defect, not revealed until some weeks later, was that it was quite wrong. This, however, is nothing against it. A physical theory that is not smashed nowadays within ninety days survives merely because it is not worth smashing. The egg, he declared, had obviously lost its evil cunning because the poisonous principle of the green dye, being exceedingly volatile at blood heat, had all evaporated in the full sunlight. It was as incorrect as it was plausible. Before carrying off the egg to be analyzed for traces of poison, the doctor obtained its full history, as far as known, from Mrs. Lane.

The essential facts are these. Captain Lane and his wife spent their last morning together doing odd jobs about the house and dyeing their son Tom's Easter eggs. As Tom insisted that he could dispose of a full twelve, Captain Lane went out and bought a dozen fresh eggs from a neighbor, instead of using those already in the house. Those which they had on hand were preserved in water glass—the liquid silicate commonly used by housewives for the purpose. Although these might be considered fresh, at least theoretically, the Lanes decided to play no pranks on a baby's stomach, and got an honest dozen. The Easter dyes they bought at the corner grocery store. There was no reason to suspect anything wrong with the colors, as they were a standard brand, guaranteed harmless to man or animal.

All went well till they came to the eleventh egg. Captain Lane, who was doing the dyeing, not being very skillful in handling such fragile things as eggs, tried to be too delicate with his technique. As a result there was a casualty. The eleventh

egg eluded his grasp and committed suicide on the tiles of the kitchen floor. Young Tom began to howl. To a child's discerning ear there is a golden magic in the words "a dozen Easter eggs," which is hopelessly tarnished if eleven, or even twelve, be substituted for the mysterious dozen. Argument, reason, exhortation to be a man and not a cry-baby, all failed. There must be one dozen, no more, no less. To pacify their clamorous son the Lanes replaced the ruined egg by one "just as good"—although it wasn't—from the crock of waterglass, with the compromise that this egg, the eleventh, was not to be devoured like the rest, but merely admired. So that there should be no mistake about the identity of the sophisticated egg, Captain Lane mixed a special dye for its identification. From equal parts of sky blue and sunflower yellow he brewed a dazzling, virulent golden green that shrieked. Tom prized this egg above all the others, and insisted that his mother "hide" it under his cot, so that he should be sure to find it before she got up.

During all these ceremonies the captain of course got himself rather messy. By the time the job was finished he was more gorgeous than a rainbow. In fishing the substitute egg out of the waterglass he managed to splash his army shoes, his tunic, his face, and his arms up to the elbows with the slithering mess. It took his wife the best part of an hour to get him and his uniform clean enough to pass inspection.

If the doctor's theory of poison had any truth in it, Captain Lane was a pretty dangerous enemy by the time his wife was through with sponging him and his clothes, and she herself was not entirely innocuous. But, as appeared later, the doctor's theory was too simple to be quite right. Nevertheless, a truly cautious health officer from a wiser planet might reasonably have quarantined the whole family for at least five years. And the same experienced officer, knowing more about life in general than do we earth dwellers in our own narrow range, would undoubtedly have forbidden Captain Lane to change his shirt at the last moment, because one of the spots on the left sleeve persistently

defied soap and water, hastily cram the discarded shirt into his kit, and jump into a taxi on the first lap of the long journey to Shanghai.

Having satisfied himself that he had all the facts in the case, the doctor left, carrying with him the guilty egg. Only by promising to send young Tom a bigger and greener one within an hour was the doctor permitted to bear off his booty. He felt confident that the chemist's analysis would disclose traces of some complicated poison in the dye which would demote the guilty egg from its interesting status as an inexplicable mystery, and reveal it as nothing more than a rather common accident.

It may be recorded here that the good doctor was bitterly disappointed. The following afternoon he received the chemist's report. The green dye was quite harmless; a child might swallow a quart of it and ask for more, if he happened to like the stuff. Rather ashamed of his part in the affair he tried to doubt that he and the two firemen had suffered more than an attack of nerves in sympathy with Mrs. Lane. Although he never quite succeeded, he wisely decided to forget the incident for the sake of his professional reputation.

After church on that fateful Easter morning, Mrs. Lane and Tom left Los Angeles with some friends for a three days' auto trip to the desert to see the wild flowers. The winter had been warm and wet, so the display promised to be more than usually splendid.

As there are neither telephones nor telegraph stations in the desert, and since they didn't have a radio in their car, Mrs. Lane missed the first report of the tragedy that made America wish it had kept out of China's private affairs. It is perhaps just as well that she did not hear the first and worst report. Later news made the tragedy more bearable—for a few.

At eleven o'clock in the evening of Easter Sunday, Pacific time, the country received its first shock, through radio and television newscasts and the newspaper extras.

"Extra! Extra! All about the disaster at sea," the newsboys piped from San Francisco to Boston. "Transport *Sheridan* founders at sea. Read all about it! Great loss of life; read all about it; extra, extra!"

It was true. The *Sheridan* had foundered less than three hundred miles from Los Angeles, with nearly all hands, before her sister ship, the *Sherman,* could come to her aid. The one fact that seemed clear was that the tragedy had actually happened. In its details the disaster stood out alone, without precedent or parallel, one of the mysterious riddles of the sea. And this was but the first of a rapid sequence of apparently inexplicable mysteries that puzzled certain curious persons for weeks, until an unpractical dreamer verified his guess at the truth.

At first, certain of the reports were received with open ridicule, as the too ambitious efforts of publicity seekers. This was true, in particular, of the strange tale told by the two "desert rats" who drifted into Los Angeles, half insane from what they had seen in the desert, two days after the *Sheridan* went down. It seems strange now that no one had sufficient imagination to link up these true but incredible reports into one simple chain of cause and effect. The fact is, however, that it required extraordinary penetration on the part of one keen-eyed old man to see what was as glaring as the sun.

2

WHAT THE RATS SAW

OF THE ENTIRE HUMAN CARGO OF THE *Sheridan* but sixteen men were saved. These included Captain Lane and three other commissioned officers whose quarters were far forward on the upper deck. At the time of the "wreck"—about nine p. m.—Captain Lane, fully dressed, and three lieutenants were playing bridge in his quarters. The transport sank stern first. The sixteen who escaped managed to launch one of the life rafts just as the ship foundered. In all, twenty men tugged at the raft to get it free of the plunging vessel before they all were hurled into the black water. Four perished in the desperate struggle to reach the raft before the suction of the sinking ship spun it like a chip in a millrace, making a boarding impossible. The wireless operator went down with his ship, after having summoned the *Sherman,* steaming through the night on her course, less than five miles to the east.

When the *Sherman* reached the scene of the wreck she found nothing but the raft with sixteen dazed men, drifting helplessly in a calm as placid as that of a mountain lake on a warm summer day. Among the survivors were two noncoms, who had been standing watch when the *Sheridan* foundered. Their depositions are the only account of what happened.

Their story is told in three words. "The ship burst."

That was all that cross-examination and a bluffing threat of court-martial could get out of them. Elaboration was not forthcoming. They stuck obstinately to their simple assertion of fact: without warning the *Sheridan* simply burst. Steel rivets in her plates cracked by thousands like the rattle of a battery of machine guns; the whole ship seemed suddenly to sit down in the water; she sank. There was no explosion, no smoke, no smell of burning. In fact, there was nothing beyond the indisputable fact that the *Sheridan,* steaming on her way as peacefully as a ferryboat, plunged to the bottom of the Pacific less than four minutes after the first rip of the rivets gave warning that the plates had burst asunder. Thirteen of the men who escaped were jolted from their bunks by the first wild plunge, picked themselves up, and scrambled for the clear deck, to fall over the first life raft. They launched it automatically, somehow, not knowing what they were doing or what was happening, except that the ship was going down in record time.

In response to a radioed request for orders, the *Sherman* absorbed the sixteen survivors into her own companies of marines and proceeded on her course to China, as if nothing had happened. Such is life in the army.

The families of all who had been aboard the *Sheridan* were notified. Captain Lane resumed his duties within eight hours, too dazed to be thankful for his escape or to make guesses concerning what had caused the inexplicable disaster. He had lost his kit, and had now only the uniform in which he stood. Not until he reached the interior of China did he fully recover his senses. What happened to him there, with him an unwilling and unsuspecting spectator of the drama, all but made him lose his senses for good and all. But it happened with such devilish casualness at first, and with such an illusory appearance of being merely an unexpectedly interesting detail of his duty, that he completely missed the sinister point of the play until it was almost too late to divert its climax. In the meantime, while he

and his men marched resolutely and unwittingly to meet their destiny, Mrs. Lane and Tom enjoyed the excitement nearer home, and old Jonathan Saxby, retired geologist, found much to interest him in the eccentric antics of the desert.

Just as the sun set on Easter Sunday, Mrs. Lane, Tom and their friends found the ideal camping place in the desert at which to spend the night. They had driven hard all the afternoon, and had now penetrated to the very heart of the desert. A sharp outcrop of limestone provided adequate shelter from the strong east winds which freshened as the sun dipped swiftly to the horizon, and several acres of flat slabs suggested the ready means of improvising a camp kitchen. A thorough search of the chosen site confirmed the general opinion that it was still too early in the season for rattlesnakes, so the party set about preparing supper. Dead sage brush gave all the fuel necessary, and in half an hour Mrs. Lane had a hot meal ready. They dined by firelight before the moon rose, cleaned up, thrust the refuse into a cleft between two limestone slabs, made up their beds, and in ten minutes were fast asleep. The following morning, half an hour before sunrise, they were on their way farther into the desert to see the best of the early flowering cacti.

The California deserts are more than alluring mysteries to tempt holiday makers. They are heavily mineralized wastes that have trapped scores of prospectors for life. Before Mr. Ford put padded leather cushions and fifty miles an hour within reach of anyone with a hundred dollars to spend for a second-hand car, the oldtimer used to tramp the desert for weeks, from one spring or water hole to the next, leading by his halter his sole companion, the patient, long-eared burro. Occasionally two or three of these inveterate prospectors would travel together, sharing the hardships and playing poker for the winnings—if any; but the majority pegged along alone. Conversation, human companionship, having to think at every step what the other fellow wants, become intolerable bores when civilization is left behind. A couple of sides of bacon, enough flapjack flour, coffee, beans

and salt to last a month or six weeks, a burro to pack the outfit, and the ideal prospector was complete. Most of them were sinewy, grizzled men, long past middle age, with stubby white beards stained by tobacco juice, their skins the rich brown of old mahogany. Many had tramped the desert for fifty years, and all believed that they should find King Solomon's mines before they dropped in their tracks, to become russet husks like dried frogs.

Not one in twenty ever found anything of value in the desert. In the credulous cities, however, even the poorest prospector could always unearth at least one flush sucker—usually a stock broker or bond salesman, eager to put up two hundred dollars to grubstake the next jaunt in search of the mystical mines. As a rule the real old-timer was shrewd, sanguine, and superstitious beyond belief. When the Ford cars began skipping like sandfleas all over the desert, the genuine prospector passed them up with silent scorn, and stuck like a brother to his faithful, plodding burro that never ran out of gas or water, or got itself punctured on the cactus thorns.

Shortly after Mrs. Lane's friends had left their limestone camp ground, old Dan O'Brien puffed up to it leading his burro. Dan had not yet breakfasted. The flat slabs offered a luxurious table. As he approached the outcrop—which he knew to its last chunk from innumerable previous visits, his expert eye automatically estimated the number and social status of the departed visitors. He read their standing from the signs of their visit as accurately as if he were silently criticizing them in a hotel lobby. Although they had cleaned up before quitting the place, they had left tracks and crumbs enough to broadcast their entire life history to a seasoned prospector like old Dan.

"This durned place is gettin' worse'n a city park," the pessimistic "rat" grunted, as he mixed his batter for his morning flapjacks.

Not a soul was in sight in the dazzling dawn, and no flivver bounded over the vast beds of purple and crimson, of lavender

and yellow, that were the desert's springtime. Yet the poor old rat, true lover of holy solitude, believed that the place was defiled and no more private than a brawling, smelly city street. He felt sad. Not that he saw the astounding beauty of the desert aflame with exotic flowers, for old Dan probably had never seen a flower of any kind in his fifty-five years in the desert. His beauty was elsewhere—in his soul, in his taciturnity, and in his passionate desire to be alone. Why the devil, he pondered, couldn't these damned tourists stick to the paved highways?

His flapjacks tasted sour. Probably they were. But this was a spiritual sourness, quite distinct from the wholesome acidity to which long years of inefficiency had accustomed him, and to which he unconsciously looked forward with an eager zest. As he scoured the frying pan with the clean, gritting sand, he gazed disconsolately out over the rolling billows of blinding colors that flowed in diminishing brilliance to the far, azure horizon, and wondered if anywhere on this earth there is still a desert that does not charm the idle. A tiny cloud of white alkali dust, five miles to the west, shone mistily in the blue haze. But this, thank Heaven, was not the nimbus of a flivver.

"That must be Jake," he muttered. "Guess I'll be sociable-like and wait."

Old Dan waited, as motionless as a lizard basking on a hot rock, till his venerable friend Jake plodded up with his burro. The desert rats had known one another intimately for at least forty years. In all that time they had exchanged, perhaps, a thousand words, no more. They were, in fact, boon companions.

"Morning," said Dan.

"Morning," Jake responded and sat down. He had long since breakfasted. He just sat, enjoying that luxury as only a man, who sees a chair or a really comfortable rock but once or twice a year, knows how to enjoy sitting. Conversation languished. Presently Dan got up to go to work. His "work" consisted in exploring every crevice of the outcrop for evidence of ores.

Although it was a geological improbability that the weathered limestone could contain gold, and although Dan O'Brien knew this fact as well as any professor of geology, he never neglected an opportunity of thoroughly prospecting those barren rocks. He must have examined every slab at least a hundred times in the past fifty years. The task always gave him something to do, and it also proved an inexhaustible source of "reports" to the successive generations of credulous city folk, who grubstaked old Dan's innumerable expeditions to the desert. In this respect the limestone outcrop was incomparably more profitable to Dan O'Brien than any gold mine he could possibly have discovered. For if he had been so unfortunate as to locate a real gold mine, some slick promoter would instantly have skinned him out of it.

Jake spent an equally busy day prospecting the gritty sand that abounded in the vicinity of the outcrop. It might be monazite, rich in osmium, cerium, iridium, thorium and half a dozen other precious metals that come small and sell big, but Jake knew perfectly well that this plebeian trash was not worth two cents a ton. He also was expected to "report" and the old chap wished to be as honest as the proprieties demanded.

Sunset found them tired, taciturn and happy. Without a word they adjourned to the oozing spring that seeped out of the limestone at its highest point on the north side. There they watered and fed their burros, prepared their respective rations of beans and bacon in silence, ate their suppers without conversation, either necessary or unnecessary, cleaned up, and turned in for the night. It was still indecently early according to city standards—barely seven o'clock.

If there were anything in the adage about "early to bed," Dan and Jake should have been practically immortal, richer than Rockefeller and wiser than Solomon, for they never stayed up later than seven, and were always out of their blankets before three forty-five. On the whole, considering their almost perfect lives, one might say that the proverb is more true than false.

The moon was full that night. Through its soft radiance the subdued hues of the desert flowers shone mistily in vast beds, like the gardens of a dream, but the tired men were too old to care. Had they been awake to see, they would have noticed nothing but the promise of another scorching day in the serenity of that unearthly landscape. Old Dan stirred uneasily in his blankets, turned over with a muttered sigh, and sank into a deeper sleep. He was used to complete silence and absolute stillness at night. His rest had been disturbed, but as yet not sufficiently to break his iron slumber. Presently he lashed out pettishly with one leg, toward what he imagined was the general direction of Jake.

"Quit movin' around, will ye?" he quarreled in his sleep. But Jake was snoring softly, almost inaudibly, like an old and comfortable cat. He lay like a log, too tired to toss. Dan forgot his unrest, except subconsciously. The two slept on, weary to the bone.

The hobbled burros began to snort. Something that they did not like was moving in the desert, where it had no business to move. Keener of muscular sense than the men, they apprehended the unnatural movements long before the sleepers began to dream uneasily of charging cavalry and regiments of braying mules. As daintily as geisha girls the two burros teetered off in the moonlight, to seek safety at the south end of the outcrop. The men slept on.

Jake woke first. His wild yell brought Dan shaking to his feet.

"Earthquake!"

A steady, creeping noise, as of millions of growing things sending out their brittle tendrils over the desert floor, rustled through the night from the farther side of the limestone ridge, and the rock slabs vibrated rapidly in unison. The air was as cold as midwinter; a slow, icy breeze drifted past the terrified men toward the source of the sound. Then in rapid succession a series of appalling noises shattered the silence of the desert

for a radius of twenty miles. First a terrific report, sharp as a pistol shot, whanged through the air. Instinctively the two men dropped flat on their faces to miss the imagined shell. Then two almost human screams from the strayed burros, the unmistakable sounds of terror from animals about to be done to death, froze the blood in the old men's hearts. Their beasts were being killed, inhumanly, unnaturally, and they were powerless to help. A terrific crashing drowned the last screams like the instant collapse of a cathedral of brittle glass on a pavement of steel. The inexplicable clamor ceased instantly, like a summer thunderclap, and only the steady, horrible creeping noise made the ghastly moonlight hideous.

Half paralyzed with fright the two desert rats reeled away to what they imagined was safety. Glancing back involuntarily Dan saw the pursuing "thing" almost upon him. For perhaps two seconds he halted in his tracks, stiff with fear, staring up at a shape which no man could name. It glistened in the moonlight like a colossal octopus fresh from the sea, its uncouth tentacles angular and jagged, shooting erratically in every direction, as if the thing were feeling its way into space. Unlike a living creature, this monster was all but transparent. Strange purples and greens pulsed and flickered through its inchoate mass like a subdued play of phosphorescent flames; a hundred dazzling pinnacles glittered like gigantic broken diamonds on the advancing crest, and from each of these points of light a score of zigzag, angular tentacles flashed into instant existence. The thing seemed not to move but to grow toward its prey. The main mass did not advance, but planted itself more firmly on the desert floor and conquered distance by lateral growth.

At the risk of his own sanity Jake turned back and dragged Dan away. Then they fled panting into the silence of the desert, blundering into cacti and stumbling over rattlesnake holes till they sank from utter exhaustion. They lay where they fell, huddled together in stupor till the endless night ended and the dawn broke.

They agreed that it was not a dream. But what of it? They were old, incurious men, used all their lives to nature at first hand, and not easily moved by the wonders that take the tourist's breath away. This, however, was new, beyond even their experience of earthquakes and the vagaries of desert storms. The thwarted curiosity of two long repressed lives suddenly burgeoned in those withered old hearts, and they became inquisitive to the point of sheer foolhardiness.

"Guess I'll go take a look," Dan remarked, picking himself up.

"Me, too," Jake seconded.

Without further parley they made their way back to the limestone ridge.

"Smell something?" Jake inquired as they drew near the first outcrop.

"It's the burros," Dan theorized.

"Couldn't smell like that after just a few hours. The sun's only been up a short spell." This was probably the longest speech Jake had ever made. Dan reproved him by reiterating his terse theory.

"See anything?" the loquacious Jake demanded as they drew near the exact spot of their mutual vision. Dan deemed a reply unnecessary. There was nothing to be seen.

They stood staring incredulously at the slabs of rock.

"There's no smell now," Dan ventured. Jake took his revenge by ignoring this superfluous remark. Unabashed, Dan chattered on like a vivacious flapper.

"Them scratches warn't there yesterday."

He indicated several fresh, deep grooves in the soft limestone. Jake nodded.

"The sage brush is all tramped down over yonder, too," he observed. "Let's find the burros."

Exploring the environs of the ledge they found abundant but inexplicable evidence of unaccountable doings in the night. In some places for a distance of fully a hundred yards from the

ridge, the sage brush was flattened and broken as if a fleet of battle tanks had passed over it, and the alkali was pitted with huge pockets or scarred by short, deep furrows where some heavy object had apparently dragged itself forward a foot at a time. The furrows were comparatively rare, the pockets much more numerous. Although it was difficult to decipher this strange evidence, the old-timers silently agreed that some massive body had rested on the dirt, and by its sheer weight sank the impress of its irregularities deep into the dust and conglomerate.

At the inner edge of one of these devastated bays in the sagebrush they came upon the carcasses of the burros, or rather upon what was left of them. Two sickening smears of crimson, an indescribable tangle of lacerated flesh, as if the wretched animals had been cut to ribbons in a slicing machine, propounded their tragic riddle to the silent sky. The poor old desert rats almost wept. They had loved their burros. Their aged eyes stared pityingly at the shocking spectacle.

"There are no bones," Dan remarked, a note of superstitious terror creeping into his voice for the first time.

"They were crushed," Jake hazarded.

"Where are the pieces?" Dan demanded.

"Don't know. Let's see."

Cold with morbid fear, they set about their gruesome search. It was thorough. Not a splinter of bone and not a single tooth was found. The horny husks of eight hoofs, all but crushed out of recognition, lay in approximately the positions that might have been expected from the general appearance of the remains.

When the fact that the bones had vanished was finally established beyond any reasonable doubt, the shaken old men stood silently staring into one another's eyes. Neither dared to speak for fear of giving himself away. Their superstition was like the ordinary decent man's religion—an experience not to be mentioned in public. Each knew what the other was thinking, and each considered the other rather a fool for his thoughts. In silence they made their way back to the outcrop, to the spot

where they had met the previous morning.

Here another freak of the night's orgies greeted their bewildered eyes. A gaping fissure five feet broad and about three hundred long parted the main body of the limestone into two irregular masses by a jagged chasm. It appeared as if the solid rock had been suddenly burst asunder by a deep-seated and violent explosion. The snap of the parting rock undoubtedly was the "pistol shot" they heard before the obliterating crash sent them fleeing into the desert. Of what had caused that crash, like the smashing of a million bottles, they found not a trace. Yet it had seemed as real and vivid as the screams of the slaughtered burros.

Not being used to expressing themselves in speech, they acted. It was tacitly agreed that they should return at once to civilization and "report." As fast as their old legs could carry them they made for the desert highway, confident of hitching a lift from sightseers returning in their flivvers to Los Angeles.

Just before they flagged their chosen victim, Dan spoke, breaking the charmed silence of a six hours' strenuous hike through the broiling heat.

"We'll get our pictures in the paper," he prophesied with lickerish glee.

"Both of us," Dan agreed.

They did.

3

SAXBY'S EXPERIMENT

DAN AND JAKE HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN GETTING a sympathetic specialist from a Los Angeles paper to listen to their story. They made all the usual mistakes of the beginner in journalistic adventures and told the polite young fellow a great deal they did not know they had said. He promised to give them a good write-up. Technically he kept his word. The "story" was genuinely funny. The poor old desert rats did not know that the professional humorist of the United Press had been turned loose on them. With such a start as Jake and Dan gave him, the humorist romped his easy way to a classic of slapstick wit. The town roared; the rats cursed. So good was the story that it was syndicated. Within a week it had been read and enjoyed by twenty million intelligent human beings, not one of whom saw the point. It was not the laughing matter those twenty million readers thought it.

The disillusioned prospectors became notorious overnight in Los Angeles and its environs. An ambitious gentleman from Hollywood offered them a fabulous sum for a three months' tour with a road show. Dan and Jake were now thoroughly enraged. Their exact account had been laughed out of court. Now they burned with a righteous anger to vindicate themselves. They signed the contract. Being familiar from long experience with

business methods of a certain kind, they insisted upon a fifty per cent cash payment in advance. It was well that they did. Their "act" was a complete flop. At the end of the week the gentleman from Hollywood was glad to send them back to the desert with his blessing and the fifty per cent.

It is rather remarkable that of all those who became familiar with the story, not one thought of verifying the details of the scratches on the limestone and the deaths of the burros. In preferring talk to the simple act of seeing, the twenty million only repeated on a small scale the dreary annals of the human race.

When Mrs. Lane returned to Los Angeles on the Thursday following Easter Sunday, she glanced over the headlines of one of the accumulated papers to see what had happened during her holiday in the desert. She did this hastily on the veranda, before she and Tom entered the cottage. The funny story of the two desert rats and their novel spree caught her eye—it was heavily featured. Skimming the lively skit she failed to catch its sinister meaning. It was too funny. She bundled up the papers and looked in the mail box.

"Well, Tom," she remarked, "we can't expect a letter from him yet, but let's see if there is one, just to be sure. Why! Here's a telegram."

She tore it open and took in the curt message at a glance, without comprehension.

"Captain Lane proceeding safely to Shanghai on U. S. transport Sherman."

This consoling but mysterious message was dated at San Diego and signed by a staff officer of the U. S. Army. What could it mean? Mrs. Lane hastily entered the house, sent Tom away to bring back Hoot from a neighbor's, and began a systematic search of the newspapers. She soon found all she wanted.

"He's safe," she sighed. "That's all that matters."

She sat thinking in silence, wishing Bob were out of the army. As her mind roamed half dreaming over their happy past

together and the doubtful months ahead, the subconscious part of her went busily to work on the rich, curious feast which she, unknowingly, had spread before it. The Easter Sunday "nightmare," the "bursting" of the *Sheridan,* the ludicrous yarn told by those imaginative old prospectors, all seemed curiously interlinked, although strangely unfamiliar and individually incomprehensible. What was the silly phrase that humorous newspaper man had used in repeating Dan's story? "Bombarded by billions of beer bottles." The asinine alliteration almost analyzed the astonishing antics of the anomalies—this absurd rejoinder flashed through her mind. She came out of her daydream.

"That's curious," she said, not knowing exactly to what she referred. "I must read that bit about those prospectors again."

On this reading the badly distorted account cleared up with startling lucidity. Even that humorous genius had not succeeded in disguising the eerie truth beyond recognition. The crash which Jake and Dan had attempted in their halting way to describe must have been very similar, although on a much larger scale, to that which she and Tom had heard in his bedroom. Like her, the desert rats had failed to find any traces of broken glass. Yet, if the "bombardment" were not a bad dream but something more substantial, the old men should have found tons of shattered glass on the limestone. The strange coincidence between her dream and theirs took on an oppressive, evil significance. Mrs. Lane suddenly felt an overpowering desire for fresh air. She went out to the back garden to wait for Tom and Hoot. The old men, she recalled uneasily, had also reported a smell of decay that dissipated as the morning advanced. What could it all mean? The rock, they declared, had "burst." Suddenly, too, like the *Sheridan.* Again a coincidence, or was it more?

The injustice of the ridicule accorded those poor old men, who had done their humble best to tell the truth, however strange, made her pulse beat faster. Isabel Lane, like her husband, was a born fighter when the cause was a just one. Her indignation rose.

"I shall write to the editor," she declared, "and tell him exactly what I think of his lying paper."

She darted into the living room and dashed off a red hot protest to the editor. Unfortunately Isabel was so angry when she wrote the letter that she made it excruciatingly and unintentionally funny. It beat the professional's effort on behalf of Dan and Jake.

"There!" she said, slapping down the inoffensive stamp, "that will let him see he isn't as smart as he thinks he is." In the rash heat of her wrath she had given a short but complete account of her own experience of a "noise" on Easter Sunday, to prove that the desert rats were not suffering from delirium tremens as was hinted by the funny man. "I myself," she added, "never touch alcoholic beverages, and I am sure that my four-year-old son is not a drunkard. He heard it, too."

When the editor read Isabel's letter he sat speechless in an enchanted ecstasy. Finally he found words.

"Call up this woman," he directed his stenographer, "and offer her ninety a week for half a column a day. She's a riot!"

Isabel's response was an indignant No. She could spark for principle but not for lucre.

"May we print your letter, Mrs. Lane?"

"If you don't, you're cowards."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lane. You will find your letter on the front page tomorrow morning. Goodbye."

The letter duly appeared, and the country enjoyed another laugh. This time, however, journalism did accomplish something useful. Isabel's letter was the essential link in a strong chain of evidence which, without it, might never have been closed. Undoubtedly old Jonathan Saxby could have got on without the letter, but its singular significance gave him a flying start of at least a week. This early start was extremely important; with it, he almost succeeded in wrecking Asia; without it, he might have stayed at home and wrecked the United States.

Jonathan Saxby, formerly professor of geology at the lead-

ing university in America, was now in his sixtieth year and at the apex of his keen, analytical powers. Although he was commonly known as "old" Saxby, he was elderly only in appearance—resembling Mr. Pickwick as that sage is usually portrayed in his later years. In mental agility he was about twenty-five. In physical endurance, according to his easily exhausted young colleagues, old Saxby beat the devil. He did not know what it was to feel tired, either in his laboratory study or on his summer rambles up precipices and over all but infinite wastes of drifting sand. He ate but once a day, but when he did dine, he depleted the commissary. In the matter of drink he was equally abstemious. Three bottles of wine, not too light, taken with his dinner, satisfied him for twenty-four hours.

When he retired from teaching, Saxby hesitated long between Italy and California as the perfect haven for old age. He could afford either, as he had made a huge pot of money as geological consultant for three of the luckiest oil corporations. These rewarded him amply. Old Saxby was no fool at business. At fifty-five he found himself with "all the world before him where to choose," and he chose California.

It was not without regret that Saxby abandoned the rosy dream of Italy. His strange hobby cast the deciding vote. Saxby was an inveterate and passionate collector. His collection was probably the weirdest that acquisitive man has ever made. It consisted of thousands of earthquakes, all neatly tabulated, classified, cross-indexed and resolved into their simplest harmonic components. To such a collector California offered obvious advantages over Italy—although California's notorious modesty might restrain her from bragging about it. Outside of Japan, possibly, California does afford the collector of earthquakes the most efficient and best organized seismological service in the world. When old Saxby learned also that the California vineyardists retail a delicious, virginal blend of three grape juices at the price of one good song per forty-gallon cask, and that nature will do what is necessary for nothing if you merely pull

the bung out of the cask and let it stand for three weeks, he hesitated no longer. He settled down in Los Angeles to spend the next sixty years of his life collecting earthquakes and eating one meal a day.

Old Saxby was a confirmed bachelor, in both theory and practice. He tolerated a fat old colored mammy as cook only because he almost never saw her. If Jemima had been so rash as to venture out of her own quarters into the master's presence, she would have been fired on the spot. His more intellectual wants were ministered to by a so-called secretary, usually a young Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino. The secretary's formal duties consisted in keeping the thousands of earthquakes straight in the filing cabinet, and in improving old Saxby's mind with quaintly frank and heathenish views on all Christian customs.

Saxby had hired Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists and plain infidels in his time, and once he had tried a Moslem. The last nearly proved his undoing. This swarthy young man was a brilliant geological chemist, an International Research Fellow, and just the collaborator Saxby needed at the time in his classic investigation of the basalts. He was obliged reluctantly to discharge this paragon of secretaries because the fiery zealot preached incessantly against the Christian vice of wine-bibbing, which to a Moslem is the filthiest of all habits. Old Saxby felt that if he kept the pest he must inevitably be reformed.

The present incumbent of this most desirable secretaryship in the world was young Mr. Yang, a Chinese Government student with his Ph.D. from Columbia. Yang also was a hybrid between geology and chemistry, but unlike the eloquent Moslem, he was the soul of circumspect discretion. Yang had but one fault; he obstinately maintained that old Saxby's topaz wine was not fit to drink when one could get the crystal clear, volatile Chinese gin. Saxby could not convert him.

It was but natural that old Saxby's dragnet method of fishing for earthquakes should haul up the Dan-Jake episode. In addition to receiving weekly reports from all the seismological

stations of the world, Saxby subscribed to at least two clipping bureaus in each civilized country. These were instructed to comb the daily press for the slightest mention of anything even remotely resembling an earthquake. The clippers had their lists of key words, such as temblor, tremor, shake, quake, landslide, and a hundred others, by means of which they sifted the daily tons of facts and misinformation dumped upon a suffocating and helpless world.

Occasionally their gleanings drove old Saxby to profanity. Thus, at election time, he received under the caption of "landslide" several tons of clippings celebrating the latest victory of the invincible grand old party. Again, under "shakes" he was wont to be deluged with advertisements for ague cures, and once under "temblor," the bureau in Mexico City sent him minute instructions for the self treatment of an unmentionable weakness to which he had never been a slave. The Dan-Jake account was gathered in under the captions "shake," "tremble" and "crash." This wild yarn, Saxby decided, would bear further inspection. He instructed Yang to file it away in the incubator—the technical term for the cabinet containing reports of embryo earthquakes that might hatch out into vigorous, adult shakes. Yang was also to inspect the local press daily for further details.

The extraordinary disturbance in the desert, if an earthquake at all, was of a new species. Old Saxby almost prayed that Dan and Jake might prove as truthful in the end as they now seemed not to be. The one piece of evidence in their account which might be of scientific value was the splitting of the limestone rock. That sounded like science, although it probably was only another lie. Before taking a jaunt out to the desert to see for himself, Saxby decided to wait for further details. There was one particularly suspicious circumstance about the whole alleged miracle. The extremely delicate Anderson-Smith seismographs at the Pasadena observatory had failed to record any trace of a disturbance on the night of the supposed event. Therefore, Saxby concluded, it was only an unusually interesting fake.

When the efficient Yang duly laid the clipping containing Isabel Lane's indignant letter before his employer, old Saxby rubbed his eyes and grunted.

"There's something in it. I'm going to call on this lady. You may dine without waiting for me this evening, Yang. I shall lock up the gin before I leave. And I shall take the key with me. So don't waste time hunting for it. Goodbye."

When Mrs. Lane answered the door bell, she looked straight into the shrewd, questioning blue eyes of an elderly, carelessly-dressed man, whose loose alpaca suit bagged in every conceivable way in which clothes can, and whose hatless bald head blushed with a charming pink like a newly bathed baby's back. The rather rotund figure concealed the stocky, well-knit frame of a powerfully built man. In his thirties old Saxby was as strong as a draft horse; in his first sixties, although somewhat shrunk, he gave the impression of great muscular power and inexhaustible endurance. His bland, childlike smile as he gazed up into Isabel's eyes was wholly disarming. She took him for an itinerant mender of umbrellas.

"Thank you," she said, hoping to get rid of him as quickly as possible, "I have nothing today."

"Not even an earthquake, by any chance?" old Saxby suggested innocently.

"An earthquake? What on earth do you mean?"

"Why—ah—an earthquake, of course," Saxby replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world to ask for one. "You see, ah——you see," he continued, laboring to explain his mission, "I collect them. And I read your most interesting letter in the paper. So I thought—naturally I thought—that you might still have some interesting details which you did not tell the paper. You see I am—ah—I'm Jonathan Saxby."

Isabel scanned the childlike face doubtfully. The old chap seemed sane enough. Should she invite him in? Hoot, materializing noiselessly from nowhere, brushed confidently against old

Saxby's baggy trousers and stalked majestically into the house. It was clearly an invitation.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Saxby?" Mrs. Lane suggested.

"Thanks, I think I will. I think I will. Now, about your earthquake," he began when he was comfortably seated; "you are sure it happened?"

"But there was no earthquake," Isabel protested. "I very carefully avoided giving any suggestion of a shake in my letter to the paper. What Tom and I heard was quite different. It was like a shower of broken glass."

" 'Bombarded by billions of beer bottles,' " old Saxby quoted softly. Yang had underlined that poetic phrase in the clipping which he laid before his master, and it had captivated old Saxby's sense of beauty.

"What do you mean?" Isabel demanded sharply. "If you are going to insinuate anything about me, as that smart Alec did about those prospectors, you may leave now."

"Not at all, not at all," he murmured deprecatingly. "I just thought what a beautiful phrase it is. Now this earthquake—or shall we say bombardment?—really was an earthquake. Those old men felt the rock shake."

"I don't believe it. Nothing in this house moved, although something *tried* to move."

"Really!" Saxby exclaimed, leaning forward. "How extraordinary. You are a human seismograph, Mrs. Lane. You see you felt the earthquake before it happened——no, that's not quite it. You felt the tension of the rocks that almost gave way to cause an earthquake. You must be singularly sensitive."

"For a sane man you talk the most extraordinary nonsense I ever heard."

"I know I do," he admitted blandly. "I always have, you know. That's why I am who I am and not, for instance, the poor old peddler you thought I was when you opened the door. But, to come back to your earthquake, or whatever you like to call it. Please tell me everything that happened. You corrobo-

rated the prospectors in their account of a tremendous smash and a bad smell. But I feel ah—I feel that you are concealing something, Mrs. Lane."

"I am. An egg."

"An egg? How extraordinary. And why didn't you tell the paper about the interesting egg?"

"Well," Isabel admitted, "I didn't wish to appear ridiculous, for one thing. For another, I thought my husband—he's a captain in the Marines—might be court-martialed if I did."

"Court-martialed?" old Saxby echoed in bewilderment. "For an egg? It isn't done, Mrs. Lane, I assure you."

"It *hasn't* been done," Isabel corrected. "But it might be if the staff officers knew enough to put two and two together."

"Have you been doing arithmetic, Mrs. Lane?"

"I have. A lot."

"And what answer do you get?"

"None. I'm not good at figures. But I know enough to hold my tongue."

"Oh, come now. You can trust me. I don't know any army men—I don't even know a policeman. And if I did I shouldn't tell him anything, even my own name. What about this egg?"

"It was just a green Easter egg."

"Do you still have it?"

"No. The city chemist destroyed it after analyzing the green dye. It was quite harmless."

"It would be," old Saxby commented drily. "I don't see what your green egg has to do with any of this, but let me tell you a little story. It is quite true. About sixty years ago some very great professors of chemistry in Germany made a beautiful theory to account for all sorts of chemical reactions. They could explain almost everything. When an experiment came out wrong, and instead of getting a nice, clear liquid or a respectable precipitate, they got a slimy mess that was neither liquid nor solid, they put the beaker up on the top shelf behind the door, because it contradicted their theory. There had been a stupid 'ex-

perimental error,' they declared. Soon the top shelf was all cluttered up with glass jars of blue and green and brown slime—experimental errors. Then they used the next lower shelf, and so on. Finally they had to use other shelves not hidden by the door, and at last, after twenty years, they had to move out of the big laboratory to a smaller one. Then a young fellow, who had no beautiful theory, was assigned to the dirty old laboratory as his workshop. The messes in those jars interested him, and he began pottering with them. When he finished, there was nothing left of the theory, and he had made slime fashionable. It is quite all the rage now in chemistry. Need I point the moral? When the city chemist finds your green egg harmless and wholesome, don't believe him. He has probably made an experimental errror."

"I am glad you think so. Although I know nothing of science, I feel with my common sense that there was something radically wrong with that egg. The cat—you saw him, the big yellow—sniffed at it and became unconscious. A similar thing happened to three men, one of them a physician."

"This sounds interesting," Saxby commented. "Won't you tell me the whole story?" he begged. "I give you my word I shall not tell anyone if you would rather I didn't. I hate publicity, anyway."

"Very well," she agreed. "You may be able to see the connection between all these freaks of nature. I can't. First, my husband was one of the sixteen men saved from the wreck of the *Sheridan.* Have you read about it?"

"I can't say that I have. You see, earthquakes are my hobby, and I have no time for the newspapers. The clippers send me all I read. I never see a whole paper."

"Well," Isabel continued, "the ship simply burst. Suddenly. Those two prospectors say the rock in the desert burst with a sound like a cannon going off. They also smelt the same kind of odor that Tom—my boy—and I did. That is one pair of coincidences. The sound of breaking glass is another. There

are several more if you will follow everything."

She gave him an accurate account of all the facts, from the dyeing of the Easter eggs to her letter to the paper.

"Now," she concluded, "if you can make anything of it, you are a lot smarter than I am. What became of that floor mat by Tom's cot? Would you steal a dollar's worth of cotton?"

Old Saxby's eyes glistened.

"I wonder," he muttered.

"What about?"

"Everything. I make no theories. You say you replaced the broken egg by one that was preserved in waterglass?"

"Yes. My husband and I used them. They were all right, but we always got new-laid ones for Tom. Some doctors think the preserved eggs lack vitamines."

"I see. May I take a look at that crock of water-glass?"

"I'm very sorry. I threw it out."

"Why?"

"Because it had gone bad."

"How 'bad,' Mrs. Lane?"

"It was all stringy and full of milky bluish spots."

"And you threw it away?" Saxby cried, a note of anguish in his voice. "Oh, what a pity! Another of those priceless 'experimental errors,' I'm afraid. Where did you put it?"

"In the can with the wet garbage. The men collected the stuff this morning."

Old Saxby groaned. "What a pity! An irreparable loss. Unless," he exclaimed, brightening, "we can find it. Where do they dump the garbage?"

"It is burned."

"Oh, dear! Hopeless. You should have been a professor in a German university—Berlin, or Leipzig. I have daydreamed of this very thing for years. And now, when it happens, a German professor throws all my experiments into the garbage can. Thank Heaven I never married."

Although Saxby's devout gratitude was not very compli-

mentary to Isabel, she accepted it with a smile.

"If the city chemist could analyze an egg, you should be able to get along with the crock."

"Oh you blessed woman. You did not throw away the crock?"

"Of course not. We aren't millionaires."

"Then it will still be dirty—chemically I mean. May I borrow it?"

"Certainly. Are you going to check up the prospectors' story?"

"I am. Tonight. If newspapers are good for anything, someone at the office should know the exact location of that limestone outcrop and how to reach it by automobile. May I use your telephone?"

"It is in the dining room—there. I have been thinking," she continued slowly, "that I should see that place, too."

"Perhaps you should, although I see no earthly reason why. Still, I never professed to understand women. Come with me, if you like."

"Thanks, I shall. While you are telephoning I'll hunt up Tom and leave him at a neighbor's."

When Isabel returned, she found that Saxby had obtained all the information necessary from the efficient newspaper office. He had also telephoned for a good car and a driver.

"We shall be there before midnight," he announced. "You are sure Captain Lane will not object when he hears of our trip?"

"Why should he?" Isabel retorted casually, much as she might have alluded to Hoot.

Old Saxby muttered something about "modern women" and suggested that they snatch a dinner at a lunch counter on the way. Isabel agreed.

"Do you want that crock now?"

"I shall leave it with my Chinese secretary. He is a chemist, you know. It won't be much off our road."

The crock was duly left with Yang to be examined chemically, and the machine sped away toward the desert highway. At first Isabel did not recognize the road in the declining light as they entered the desert; but presently one landmark and then another made it certain that the car was taking the same route as that which she and her friends had followed. The man drove straight ahead, sure of his way, for five hours. When the moon rose he slackened the pace.

"It must be over there to the east about five miles," he said. "Shall I let you out here, or will you risk a puncture? I have four spares."

"Chance it," Saxby ordered. "I'll pay."

The car left the road and cautiously picked its way around the cacti. Within half an hour they made out the dim blue mass of a low ridge directly ahead of them in the moonlight.

"That's it," Saxby exclaimed. "We can walk the rest of the way. Wait here for us," he directed the driver.

On reaching the outcrop they found the jagged fissure immediately. The desert moonlight etched every detail in glaring relief.

"This is the first check," Saxby remarked.

Isabel did not reply. She was staring at her surroundings, strangely unfamiliar in that light, not yet certain of her surmise. She walked over to a cleft in the rock and pushed aside the small flat slab covering it. The desiccated refuse of the meals she had cooked was still there.

"This is the place," she said slowly, cold with a strange fear, "where we ate our supper and breakfast. I must have sat directly over that fissure. And I remember now," she continued, "there was a long crack in the limestone just where we sat. Tom called our attention to it when he saw a small lizard run out of it in the morning. I did not recognize it fully in the moonlight. We went to sleep before the moon rose."

Saxby said nothing immediately. He was thinking and using his eyes.

"Two and two," he commented. "And here is the four. Do you notice these fresh scratches in the limestone?"

He got down to examine them.

"Most interesting," he commented. "You can find any combination of minerals you like to name in this desert. This rock is sandstone speckled with particles of coarse quartz sand. Calcium carbonate and silicon dioxide. Common enough, both of them. But most interesting."

"Is there anything unusual?"

"Not a thing. Let us see what that curious fissure looks like. It may give us an idea for an experiment that should have been tried a century ago. But we were all professors together, and we put away the really interesting things out of sight on the top shelf—where they couldn't make us think."

"What sort of an experiment will you try?" Isabel asked as they reached the lip of the fissure.

"Hard to say. I shall know better when Yang finishes analyzing the inside glaze of that crock. But I shall begin it tomorrow morning in any event."

"We sha'n't be home till morning," Isabel reminded him. "And you will be all tired out."

"I never sleep when I'm working. Well, this crack is the most interesting thing yet," he continued from his knees.

"Why?" Isabel demanded, again going cold with that unaccountable fear.

"Because it is just like the rest of the rock except for one detail. All the particles of quartz have disappeared." He struck a match. "See for yourself. The limestone is peppered with little holes—all empty. There's not a particle of quartz sand visible."

"Promise," Isabel said suddenly, "never to tell a soul that I know of this place, or that I was ever here."

"Very well," Saxby agreed. "On account of your husband, I suppose?"

She nodded. "There may be no connection between the

wreck of the *Sheridan* and what those prospectors saw. But it is safer to say nothing."

"Undoubtedly. There may be no connection. More likely there is. I shall know definitely after I finish my experiment. Never mind; Captain Lane sha'n't be court-martialed. Now let us check up on the rest of the story. I want to see exactly how those burros were killed."

They soon located what they sought. The weather had been hot. Saxby was about to go on alone when he stopped suddenly. The faint rumor of an all but inaudible sound had almost crept over the threshold of his hearing. Listening consciously he heard nothing. He went on in the glaring moonlight, hurrying to get his unpleasant task done. He had gone perhaps twenty yards when he stopped instantly, half paralyzed by an instinctive fear.

"Good God!" he ejaculated. "What's that?"

Although he was in no position to realize the truth in that awful moment, his intended experiment had already started and was now progressing at a terrific rate. A dry, creeping rustle, like the gentle friction of innumerable withered snake skins being slowly rasped over one another, whispered aridly through the moonlight. It was the same sound as that which the prospectors had heard and which they had vainly striven to describe to the humorous reporter. To Saxby it was an unexpected horror; the prospectors had succeeded only in describing the shattering crash which ended their vision.

Slowly turning his head he stared back toward the ridge and saw Isabel transfixed by fear before something that seemed to move. It was dimly self-luminous with a milky, palpitating radiance that rhythmically oscillated between purple and green, and the whole mass was utterly shapeless. Its form, if it had any, was beyond analysis. But even as he watched the flickering phosphorescence the dim bulk began to assume definite shape and became angular at a thousand glittering points. Whatever the thing might be, it was striving to come to life. Sensing the intensity of that dumb struggle to live, Saxby came to his senses.

He darted forward toward the almost living mass and dragged Isabel away. She was fully conscious, and she knew now what had frightened her four-year-old son half out of his mind.

Expecting at every instant to hear the annihilating crash of the thing's destruction they raced for the car. The crash never came, at least in their hearing. Their failure to hear the thing's end filled them with a new fear. Was it alive? And if so, how long would it live? Could it move? If it did not overtake the car before its exit from the desert, in what shape would it appear in some city or village? And what was its food, if indeed food was necessary to its continued existence? They remembered the burros. But these had been merely slashed to ribbons, not devoured, unless the failure of the prospectors to find a trace of the animals' bones accounted for some unnatural manner of feeding.

They stumbled into the car exhausted.

"Home, as fast as you can go!"

They sat tense and silent, waiting for the echo of a crash which never came. As they shot out to the highway, Saxby recovered his curiosity.

"I wonder," he muttered, "whether I carried that crock into my house with both hands or only one?"

"You carried it in one hand. I remember because you had to open the door with your key."

"Then my fingers must have come in contact with the glaze on the inside. That explains a lot. Gad! I hope nothing has happened to Yang. Can't we go a little faster?"

Saxby's fears were unfounded. Nothing had happened to Yang.

4

YANG'S DINNER

"YANG," OLD SAXBY INQUIRED, ONE MORNING about two weeks after his return from the desert, "do you think I could learn Chinese at my age?"

Yang, who spoke an almost faultless English after his exhaustive linguistic purging in both Canton and New York, considered the problem dispassionately. His delicate, intellectual features bore a slightly pained expression.

"No," he answered simply.

"Why the devil not?"

"Because," the truthful Yang replied, giving his answer an unintended twist, "I do not know how stupid you are, Mr. Saxby."

"You don't, eh?" old Saxby snorted. "Well, I can't say the same for you. Here you've been messing about for a fortnight with that analysis, and you haven't found a thing."

"There are heavy traces of silicon," Yang reminded him reproachfully.

"Naturally. There would be. Especially after I told you there was waterglass in that crock before Mrs. Lane scoured it out with boiling water. What would you have found if I had told you she used the crock for making home brew?"

"Traces of alcohol," Yang replied promptly. "I am one expert chemist."

"You seem to be one expert diplomat, too," Saxby remarked.

"Oh, no, Mr. Saxby. I should find whatever you told me Mrs. Lane kept in the crock because you are like the great George Washington. You never lie. May I inquire why you wish to learn Chinese at your age, Mr. Saxby?"

"Because I want to study the geology of China at first hand."

Yang received this information with a dead silence that was eloquent. To Saxby's ears that respectful silence announced that George Washington had stepped off his monument.

"As you don't believe me," he continued, "I may as well tell you the truth. You would find out sooner or later anyhow. I must overtake Captain Lane and induce him to spend a leave in China after he has done his job. There is no telling how long your fellow countrymen may be fighting among themselves. That isn't our affair. But I have a strong suspicion that our men will be withdrawn as soon as all American citizens are safely out of the danger zone. Lane may be on his way home in one month, or two, or three. I must get to him before he starts back to the United States. His wife and I agree that he had better not come home just yet."

"Mrs. Lane would like a divorce?" Yang inquired blandly.

"You unscientific idiot! Why must you always jump to the most ridiculous conclusion?"

"Because I have lived in America six years. I know the customs of the country," he added proudly. "And you call on Mrs. Lane every day."

"Well, you've slipped up this time. You have an oriental mind. Mrs. Lane is twenty-five. I'm sixty and no fool. I am more interested in Captain Lane's clothes than I am in his wife. Do you know anything of the province of Kansu in China?"

"I know everything about it," Yang admitted modestly. "I was born there."

"That's good. We shall probably be leaving for Kansu

some time next week, if I can get passports for one of the concessions on the coast."

"Captain Lane is going to Kansu?"

"Of course. I expected you to draw that conclusion. It's obvious. Mrs. Lane had a cablegram from the Chief of Staff in Tokyo saying that her husband had been ordered to lead an expedition into Kansu to rescue a nest of British and American missionaries at Teng-shan. He is on his way there now. I've got to follow at once."

"I think it will be very dangerous," Yang remarked with an engaging smile. "Probably you will be killed."

"I doubt it. How am I to get permission to start for the interior? The military authorities will coop me up on some stuffy battleship. I can't even begin to get killed, as I see it. That's the crux of the problem. Now, if I could learn enough Chinese to ask my way intelligibly, I could go alone after your friends do for you. If only I can get past the busybodies at Shanghai I shall find my way somehow to Kansu and join Lane there. You will have to think of some way of getting me in and well started. After that I can shift for myself. I've been in worse places than China, and I'm not dead yet. And I'll wager the Chinese in Kansu, or anywhere in the interior, won't hear a word of all this political fuss till five years after the row is peaceably settled. You are still as primitive as the early Israelites once you get away from your westernized coast cities. Now, Yang, I put myself unreservedly in your hands. Get me safely started for Kansu and I'll remember you handsomely in my will. If I return to Los Angeles with my own head on my shoulders, I'll give you a cash bonus of exactly double what you would get otherwise. So it will pay you to treat me tenderly. Do you accept?"

Yang made a formal bow.

"I accept, Mr. Saxby," he said. "My father is a very old man. I have not seen him since I left Kansu to enter the Christian College in Canton."

"All right, Yang. It's a go. How will you get me through the lines?"

"We shall walk through. I think you overestimate the difficulties, Mr. Saxby. Am I to know why you wish to catch Captain Lane in Kansu?"

"Eventually you will have to know. So shall I. But as I am not exactly clear yet in my own mind, I can't very well enlighten yours."

"It may be what you call a wild goose chase?"

"Possibly. In a way I hope it does turn out so. Then again I pray that it may not. Curiosity is the one vice that I have not yet overcome. I never cared much for the others—eating, reforming people, and so on." Old Saxby sighed. "I wish I were a cat or something of the sort with nine lives. There's so much to be pried into."

Saxby sat dreaming for a few moments while Yang busied himself with the daily crop of earthquakes. Suddenly he started up as if stung.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" he exclaimed, seizing the telephone. "Taxi at once," he ordered when he got his number, and gave the address. "Of course," he continued to Yang, "you found nothing but traces of silicon in your analysis. I see it all now. Clear this mess out of the way as fast as you can. I'll be back in an hour with work enough to keep you busy till we leave for China."

When Saxby returned, he presented Yang with two cartons full of neat little packages of dyes for Easter eggs. He had bought out the entire stock of the neighborhood grocery where the Lanes had obtained their half dozen packages. The man assured him that this stock was that from which he had sold for the past season. It had been put away in the storeroom to wait for the next Easter week.

"There's your work," Saxby announced. "Analyze the lot. Don't overlook anything. Get the results accurate to a tenth of a per cent."

Yang groaned, but dutifully set to work. It was a routine job such as any competent senior in college could have done easily, and Yang hated routine.

"Oh, I almost forgot the most important thing," Saxby continued lightly. "Mix this blue with an equal amount of the yellow in tap water and analyze the mixture."

Yang sighed and set out his apparatus on the laboratory table by the west window of the room.

While Yang toiled twelve hours a day at the multitude of little packets, old Saxby used all his diplomacy to obtain passports for himself and his secretary. On the third day he succeeded. Within a week they would be on their way to China. In the meantime, while Yang slaved, he could run out to the desert for a farewell inspection. He invited Isabel to accompany him, but she was forced to decline, as Tom was suffering from the effects of a surfeit of watermelon. Saxby set out alone, this time early in the morning, with a competent driver, on a small truck. He chose this unusual and jolty conveyance because its heavy tires eliminated the danger of punctures. He wished to drive right up to the limestone outcrop and be able to leave in a hurry if necessary.

They reached the ridge shortly before noon. A shimmering heat haze hovered over the slabs of rock, and regiments of lizards scurried over the scorching surfaces with their tails up and heads erect. From the carefree manner in which they pursued their avocations it was evident that no ponderous enemy had recently marched over their barren territory. Bidding the driver wait with the truck at a convenient spot, old Saxby began a systematic exploration of the whole vicinity.

The fissure was apparently unchanged since it had first opened nearly three weeks previously. Saxby confirmed his discovery that all the quartz particles in the limestone walls of the fissure had disappeared. Searching the surface of the slabs in the neighborhood of the deep, fresh grooves, he noted a similar peppering of small cavities that must have contained silicates.

The important point was, when were these pockets emptied? Before or after the prospectors heard the "shot" that announced the fracture of the limestone? And if the former, precisely how long before? Although he all but went into a trance thinking of possible ways and means, Saxby could devise no experiment to fix the age of those holes. There must be some simple method, he reasoned, of deciding to within one per cent of the exact age the length of time that a rock surface has been exposed to the air and sunlight. Pondering this simple riddle, he almost broiled himself before reluctantly abandoning the outcrop to the lizards, who seemed to enjoy being fried.

His next task was to examine the spot where the burros had perished. Sun and the desert air had removed practically the last trace of the animals. The eight shells of the hoofs alone remained. Saxby raked every foot of the dust in the vicinity with a stick of dead sagebrush, but found nothing more. There was not a trace of the animals' bones. If the bones were indeed in that dust they must have been pulverized to the fineness of flour.

Trained by long years of scientific work to exact observation and the cool sifting of evidence, old Saxby sat down in the dust to recall every detail of the prospectors' story before leaving the spot. Had he checked every point? What else, besides the animals' bones, should he naturally expect to find in the place where they had been killed? What were they doing when they met their deaths? An obvious but singular fact, whose significance had escaped the shrewd, practical intelligence of Dan and Jake, leaped into old Saxby's mind.

The prospectors related as a matter of course that their burros were hobbled for the night. They had strayed at the first hint of danger. Dan and Jake even theorized a bit. They remarked that, had the poor beasts been free to run, they could easily have escaped. With their front fetlocks tied together, so that they could move forward only six inches at each step, the animals were helpless before their enemy. What, Saxby asked himself, had become of the ropes that hobbled the burros? They

were not where they should have been. To eliminate guesswork as far as possible, Saxby searched every yard of the terrain from the spot where the hoofs lay to the oozing spring on the north side whence the burros had strayed. At the end of a four-hour search he concluded that the ropes had gone the same way as the bones—whatever that might be.

"This," he remarked with a smile of satisfaction, "probably explains why the *Sheridan* burst. Still, I mustn't jump to conclusions. Yang hasn't found anything, and I half hoped he would."

He next made a careful inspection of the spot where Isabel and he thought they saw the luminous apparition. He found nothing suspicious except two slight depressions in the alkali dust. These, however, might have been mere natural accidents or rabbits' sleeping places. Whatever they might be, Saxby judged that they were too doubtful to have any value as evidence.

"If I could only put together the pieces I have," he pondered, "I could probably solve the whole puzzle now. Unfortunately I don't quite see how all the pieces fit together. I hadn't allowed for the missing ropes last week, and I thought then I saw a probable way through. It follows that what I think I know now is probably not so."

As he strolled back to the truck he toyed with a possible explanation which Isabel had shown him, with some indignation, the previous day. One of the leading psychologists of America had sent her a marked copy of the *Weekly Psychological Bulletin,* current issue, with a learned article by himself adorning the place of honor. The title of this metaphysical attempt to be scientific was *Collective Hallucinations.* In it the eminent author proved (or said he proved) that two or more persons in the same place at the same time can, and should, see the same thing when it isn't there. He cited the recent story of Dan and Jake, also Isabel's and Tom's similar experience in confirmation. Carried to its limits, this theory would prove that life is a morbid

succession of multiple nightmares. Saxby weighed it and found it wanting. The ingenious author of course did not know that the hallucination was triple, not merely double; Saxby had not advertised his adventure with Isabel in the desert. Therefore the psychologist may be pardoned for rushing into print with a half-baked theory.

Even the most careful observers will sometimes overlook a significant detail in the investigation of a brand new problem. In summing up his day's work Saxby thought that he had accounted for all the vital possibilities. He climbed up with the driver, and the truck started home, jolting over the stunted cacti and smoke trees just as the sun set. Saxby had overlooked the most obvious of all the facts in the prospectors' experience, in his own and Isabel's, and in the wreck of the *Sheridan.* What is even more remarkable, when we consider the singular sagacity which Saxby exhibited in this strange investigation, is that he completely missed the same obvious fact in Yang's "hallucination"—for Yang also was to bear out the psychologist's fantastic speculation.

The morning of Saxby's second expedition to the desert, Yang set to work at seven and slaved through the day till seven at night. He was determined to get the last of those exasperating little packets of gaudy colors analyzed before his master's return. There remained only the blues and the yellows and the bright green dye made by mixing the two. As he expected, and as was but natural, several rather delicate complications arose when the blue and yellow were mixed in ordinary tap water. Of course the specific chemicals responsible for the respective colors reacted to form new and more difficult compounds than either presented individually. In spite of himself Yang began to become interested in his analysis.

The problem before him was a good example of an extremely difficult type of manipulation. The numerous compounds formed by the union of the blue and yellow dyes were extremely

unstable. A difference of a tenth of a degree Centigrade in the temperature of the mixture permuted these unstable compounds through long series of allied substances. It was an exceedingly ticklish job at any stage of the game to isolate a particular one of these compounds, and it required even more delicate skill to keep the initial substance constant throughout the analysis and prevent it from slithering into one of the others. Yang almost began to enjoy himself.

Noon came and passed, but he never thought of lunch. At three o'clock black Jemima stuck her head cautiously into the laboratory to ask if he were going to eat. Her best corn fritters had twice been thrown out, but she would make a fresh batter if Yang so desired. Yang said something snappy in Chinese. Then, repenting of his profanity, he instructed the humble Jemima to prepare him a real Chinese dinner for seven o'clock—soup, pork, fish, rice and six hard-boiled eggs. He continued his pursuit of the elusive twentieth compound.

At seven-fifteen, while his master was still jolting homeward on the truck, Yang sighed, washed his hands, and took a last look around the laboratory before going to dinner. He had not succeeded in capturing his prey. The twentieth of those subtle compounds still reposed undisturbed in its beaker. The table by the window was in a rare mess. By habit a tidy technician, Yang as a rule left everything in apple-pie order. This evening, however, exhausted by twelve incessant hours of the most exacting work, he knocked off without setting everything to rights, planning to return after dinner and clean up. The soiled towel on which he had dried his hands he carelessly tossed into the glazed earthenware crock, which Mrs. Lane had used for preserving eggs, and on which he had wasted nearly two weeks in a futile attempt to discover something of chemical interest. Dog-tired he locked the door of the laboratory after him as a matter of habit and went to dinner.

The first course, a really excellent subgam soup, somewhat revived him. He began to long for more stimulating conquests.

The wistful quart of old Saxby's topaz wine did not attract him. He wondered whether Saxby, in the excitement of an early start, had forgotten to lock the sideboard. In the true scientific spirit he left the table to investigate. Old Saxby had forgotten. With a short exclamation of triumph, Yang extracted a full wicker quart of his favorite Chinese gin, and removed Saxby's offensive grape juice from his range of vision.

The first moderate cocktail acted merely as an inspiration to Yang's appetite for roast pork. The second and third spurred him to great deeds on the fried fish. By the time he had downed the thirteenth he was calling shrilly for another half dozen hard-boiled eggs. Thereafter he became somewhat confused and upbraided the perspiring Jemima for the bushels of rice which she insisted he had ordered.

By nine o'clock he was very serious. A high sense of duty impelled him to set the laboratory to rights before his master's return. Saxby might be expected now at any minute. Before leaving the table he peeled another egg, ate it, and stuffed four into the pocket of his coat to sustain him in the laboratory.

After considerable experimenting he managed to unlock the laboratory door. His logic now became somewhat erratic. It seemed to Yang that the most important thing to be done first on entering the laboratory was to lock the door after him. Otherwise old Saxby might come and catch him. Not that Yang felt guilty or intoxicated; he merely had a strong intuition that Saxby would jump to an unjust conclusion and give him the devil for nothing. The locking of the door in the dark was a long and complicated operation. It never occurred to Yang that it would have been much simpler to have turned on the lights before attempting to find the keyhole. Having succeeded at last he groped for the light switch. It was on the wall to the west of the door. Yang was now in that sublime state when "east is west and west is east and never the twain shall meet." He began swearing volubly in his native tongue as he sawed blindly for the switch. After five minutes of knocking over stools and

smashing glassware that had no business being where it was, Yang lapsed into cold English.

"Oh hell," he muttered, on the verge of tears, "what's the use? All damned things are against me."

He tumbled over to the one fairly bright spot in all that hostile darkness, the dimly outlined rectangle of the west window by his work bench. The slim sickle of the setting moon and the blaze of icy stars shed a doubtful half light on the clutter of beakers and ring stands on the table, rendering their barely visible outlines mistily unreal. Yang lurched for the stool which was not where it should have been, missed it, tipped over a full beaker of bright green dye, and came down heavily on his side. A crunching in his pocket announced the tragedy. His four priceless hard-boiled eggs were ruined. To Yang in his fuddled condition this loss took on the vast proportions of a cosmic injustice. The stars, that wisp of a moon, the darkness and the treacherous stool on which he had jarred his jawbone in falling, all were against him. He was too deeply hurt for tears. Pulling himself up to the edge of the work-bench, he recovered the stool and slumped down on it.

To console himself he fished the ruined eggs out of his pocket and tried in that feeble light to salvage some of the yolks at least. For his pains he got a gritty mouthful of egg and broken shells. With a pettish gesture of impotence he hurled what was left of the eggs into the one receptacle that loomed huge in the semi-light above all its lesser neighbors—Mrs. Lane's glazed crock into which, three hours previously, he had tossed the soiled towel. Then, baffled and defeated by the brutal injustice of the universe, he sank his weary head on his arms and sought solace in oblivion.

Only the faint radiance of the stars comforted him, and only the cold light of the sickly moon gleamed uncertainly on his glossy black hair, but he dreamed with agonizing intensity of blinding suns that pulsed with a baleful green, or glowed with a ruddy purple like the living hue of some unnatural blood.

About half past ten Saxby returned.

Though Jemima had eagerly awaited his arrival, she did not dash out to greet him and trumpet the disgraceful tidings of Yang's orgy. She knew better. Like the essentially catty female that she was, in spite of her two hundred and fifty pounds of shoggling, good-natured flesh, she had left the empty gin bottle in a conspicuous place on the dining-room table. It could not fail to catch old Saxby's eye where it stood, directly under a sixty-watt electric light going at full blast.

"That damned Yang is drunk again," Saxby exploded when he beheld the mute betrayal. "Why can't he learn to drink good wine like a Christian?"

Believing that the dissolute Yang had gone to bed to sleep off his indiscretion, Saxby prepared to do likewise. There would be time enough in the morning to attend to Yang. For once in his life, Saxby looked forward to going to bed. His tramping in the desert and the jolting ride had left him rather tired.

Saxby's bedroom was on the second floor, directly over the laboratory. As he turned off the light before getting into bed, he glanced out of the open window, over the low, distant hills behind which the sharp horns of the setting moon were just dipping.

The queer unearthly beauty of the night landscape gripped him for a moment, as he stood motionless, trying to fix permanently on his consciousness its elusive appeal. His whole body, not merely his reasoning memory, seemed to sense a new quality in this sudden strangeness of a familiar, commonplace world. He experienced a feeling of intimacy, not with the spirit of the night, but with the solid bulk of those massive hills behind which the moon was fast setting.

"What a beastly sensation," he exclaimed aloud, turning his back on the window. "Nerves, that's all. I felt as if the earth of my grave were feeling through my flesh to get at my bones."

Going to bed with such a thought as that would be suffi-

cient to give almost any man a nightmare. Old Saxby was no exception. For ten feverish hours he tossed in a torment that his drugged will strove vainly to end. Part of the time he was half awake and conscious that he was dreaming, yet he could not shake off the lethal stupor poisoning his mind. The dreams were strangely unnatural and yet more strangely real. There was a curious, insanely illogical but yet inevitable sequence in the meaningless panoramas that rolled past his vision like an infinite succession of thunder clouds, each of them instinct with some forgotten significance which he struggled to recall.

The isolated fragments were the least endurable. A small, shapeless thing would materialize out of an infinite void, seem to expand and yet not to expand, till finally, in some appalling sense, it reconciled its own self-contradiction by ceasing to exist. Again and again this motif recurred and each time that the void prepared to give it birth, the helpless spectator rehearsed the sight he dreaded a million times before it happened. A second recurrence of a different kind was almost as bad. Like the pulsations of a vast aurora a slow rhythm of dull purple and green throbbed maddeningly through the whole of infinite space, coming and going with discordant regularity. This also was self-contradictory; yet it existed and was real. Through all that horrible dream a voice kept chanting monotonously. "This is not a dream; this is not a dream; these things have happened; you felt these older things before you had a mind."

When he finally threw off the incubus that oppressed him, Saxby felt like a wet towel.

"What a night," he groaned, feeling under the pillow for his watch. "Great Scott! No wonder I had a nightmare. Serves me right for lying in bed ten hours."

But, as he began to dress, he felt with every bone of his body that he was unwell and that his awful dream was not merely the result of over-exhaustion. It had been too real. Some definite, physical thing must have caused it. A faint odor caught his attention. He sniffed the air critically.

"That infernal woman has been putting the garbage can right under my window," he snorted. "If she wasn't such an artist at cooking I'd fire her before dinner tonight. Hang it! I'll have to speak to her." He shaved and hurried downstairs to do his disagreeable duty by Yang and Jemima.

On reaching the dining-room he relented so far as Yang was concerned. The empty gin bottle still squatted blatantly in the exact center of the table. The table was set as usual for breakfast for one, although it was long past Yang's customary hour. Old Saxby concluded that the wretched Yang had taken one look at the table and bolted back to bed to sleep off his headache. At any rate the fellow was honest, he reflected; he had not tried to hide the empty bottle and lay his indisposition to the weather or overwork. Saxby forgave him and rang for Jemima. She came, waddling, expecting a crown of gold for her perfidy in the matter of the gin bottle.

"Jemima," Saxby exploded without any priming, "I want you to stop putting the garbage can under my window. It is one of your most disgusting customs."

Jemima called upon her Lord to bear witness that she was innocent. Saxby, invoking his own gods, declared that he had smelt Jemima's offense with his own nose. The debate degenerated into a shouting match, wailing and tearful on Jemima's part, vigorous and vociferous on Saxby's. At last, getting nowhere by such means with the obstinate woman, Saxby assented to her plea that he look for himself.

The can was in its usual place on the north side of the house.

"Uh," Saxby grunted as the victorious Jemima waddled back in triumph to her kitchen. "There must be something dead under my window." He walked round to the west side of the house to inspect.

The windows of Yang's laboratory were directly under those of Saxby's bedroom. At the first glance Saxby thought the laboratory windows were open. At the second he stopped short.

The morning breeze was blowing into the laboratory, but the windows were down and locked. The panes of glass had vanished. Not a splinter remained in the putty, and there was no mark of any implement, either on the putty or the surrounding frames, to give a clue to the manner in which the panes had been lifted clean out of their beds.

"What the devil?" he muttered, going up to examine the window frames. Then he staggered back as if shot, suddenly sick and faint. He had seen what, less than ten hours before, was Yang. Now it was only a shapeless lump of flesh draped over a work-table and flowing down over a four-legged stool. It looked more like a squid than a man.

Saxby's first thought when he recovered his senses was of the coroner. There would have to be an inquest. He had seen enough to know that half an hour after any inquest that might be held the whole country would be paralyzed with fear. All the facts would have to come out, and the public was not yet prepared to receive them intelligently. Saxby himself did not understand the half of them. What good could come of throwing the country into a panic? To warn the people would be futile. They had no means of protecting themselves. Until he or someone else succeeded in tracing the evil to its source, it would be sheer insanity to advertise its existence.

Looking round to make sure that Jemima was not where she had no business to be, Saxby returned to the window of the laboratory. The high tile wall, the shrubs and trees of the garden, secured him from the curious eyes of passers-by on the street. He climbed in at the window. It was essential to his plan that Jemima, the only possible human witness, should believe that he had not entered the house.

As he had half anticipated, he found the laboratory door locked on the inside. He did not unlock it. Poor Yang had apparently shut himself in for fear of being caught by his employer in his usual evening haunts about the house. The old-fashioned wooden shutters were still intact. Saxby set about his

task. The odor of decay was still strong but bearable.

There was no time to examine all the inexplicable havoc in the laboratory. One detail, however, was obvious on the most casual inspection. Every particle of glass had disappeared. Multicolored messes still dripped from the shelves as the chemicals from the vanished bottles mingled, and neat little piles of rainbow-hued salts marked the places of innumerable glass containers that had simply ceased to exist. All metallic objects were apparently normal.

Going over to the work-bench Saxby picked up Yang's laboratory notebook and glanced rapidly through the pencilled entries of the preceding day. Although much was half obliterated by the bright green dye which had drenched the open book and soaked into the porous paper when Yang in his fall upset the beaker, short jottings and long chemical equations told the brief story of the nineteen successful analyses. Then followed a disjointed sequence of tentative guesses and abandoned trials on the twentieth compound generated by the reactions of the blue and yellow dyes upon one another.

Saxby slipped the notebook into his pocket and explored the work-table in detail. From the tangible evidence before him it was not difficult to reconstruct Yang's last day on earth. The soiled towel in Mrs. Lane's crock and the crushed fragments of the four hard-boiled eggs, one partly eaten, told their own story. Yang had wiped the composite green dye off his hands on the towel, and he had brought back the eggs for a late supper after returning intoxicated from dinner. By some drunken mishap he had smashed them, tried to eat one, and thrown them away. The smears on the black surface of the work-table marked the places where the test tubes and beakers had disintegrated like the rest of the glass in the laboratory.

Struck by the singular fact that the glazed crock seemed to have survived intact, Saxby reached for it to examine it carefully. It fell to powder in his grasp. The towel also, still discolored by the stains of the dyes, became a pinch of white dust

as he tried to pick it up.

It was necessary to examine Yang. At the first touch his clothing fell apart like the towel. The whole of it now weighed perhaps as much as an open handful of uncrushed thistle-down, and it crumbled to dust at the lightest touch. On the body itself there was not a scratch. Thus far it seemed perfectly normal. But its solidity was gone. In a horrible manner it was shapeless and without resistance, like a lump of melting jelly, held together only by its skin like water in a thin rubber bag. So far as Saxby could force himself to explore, he found no trace of a bone in all that shapeless lump. Yang's bones had vanished as completely as had the glass. His hanging lips disclosed gums that were toothless.

Saxby executed his gruesome task as quickly as possible and set about his more practical work of preventing the inquest. Cautiously opening one shutter, he slipped out of the window, closed the shutter after him and walked round to the kitchen door.

"Where is Mr. Yang?" he asked.

"He done been sleeping off his gin in the laboratory," Jemima replied promptly, glad of the chance to unbosom herself at last. Saxby laughed.

"All right," he said. "Don't disturb him till seven o'clock. He should be pretty hungry by that time. By the way," he added as an afterthought, "I want some fresh crabs for dinner. Go down to the fish market and pick out a dozen big ones. They must be fresh. If they're not, I'll fire you."

Jemima began to grumble. It was a good hour's ride on the street car to the fish market, and Jemima was too fat to get into a taxi.

"Get along with you," Saxby ordered. "What do you think I'm paying you for? I want those crabs. I'm going out myself in a minute or two, but I shan't leave till I see you on your way with a basket."

When Jemima was safely round the corner, Saxby dived

into the cellar and brought up a five-gallon can of gasoline which Jemima kept for cleaning and other household purposes. This he hurriedly transported to the laboratory, entering by the window as before. With the chairs, tables, the wooden shelves and two cabinets, it was easy to arrange the materials for a very hot and quick fire. The large metal cans of highly inflammable mineral oils, which Yang had kept on hand as a matter of course for use in his work, also about fifty pounds of the proper chemicals scooped off the shelves, and four large cans of thermite, added greatly to the potential heat. Saxby then drenched the body in gasoline and sprinkled what was left over the highly inflammable stuff piled around and over the body. Finally he tore several pages out of a book and placed them on the floor about a foot away from the pile. The laboratory supply of white phosphorus—two dozen long, cheesy sticks—was then taken out of its can, where it had been submerged in water, and carefully disposed on the paper. Before Saxby was through the window the phosphorus was already fuming.

"I could get life for this, I suppose," he remarked as he darted into the kitchen. "Well, I can't help it. This is the lesser of two evils."

The house was at least two hundred feet from its nearest neighbor. The smoke and flames issuing from the shuttered window of the laboratory should be seen by the neighbors five minutes after the fire started, and the firemen would be on the spot in another five minutes. There was no danger to the neighboring houses, but Saxby's rambling frame structure would probably burn to the ground. One thing was certain; the firemen would not succeed in extinguishing the furnace in the laboratory until what was left of poor Yang had evaporated in smoke. The heat of the thermite fire would preclude any immediate attempt to recover the body—provided its presence were suspected. When Jemima returned, she of course would tell the neighbors that Yang had been burned to death in the laboratory. His intoxication would account for the fire and his being over-

come before he could escape or call for help. They would search the ruins for his calcined bones and find nothing, not even his teeth. Saxby considered his alibi perfect. Yang's disappearance would merely become a newspaper mystery for a month. Well, let them theorize. They could say he had gone back to China or Mexico, while under the influence of liquor.

With a last look of regret at his beloved earthquakes in their stacked filing cases, Saxby slipped his passport into his pocket, opened the front door, and walked out. At the corner he glanced back to ease his conscience with regard to the neighbors' houses. There was no danger. If the worst came to the worst, and his own house was burned to the ground, the firemen could easily play on the others, the nearest of which was in but slight danger of falling sparks. Old Saxby sighed. He hoped the firemen would save the front room and his earthquake. The filing cabinets were steel, but that wouldn't help much in a really hot fire.

He hailed a taxi and gave the driver Mrs. Lane's address. Easy lies the head that has a perfect alibi.

He first heard that his house had been burned to the ground as he sat sipping tea with Isabel. The afternoon paper featured the spectacular blaze. None of the neighboring houses were harmed. The hectic neighbors had broken into the front room when they first saw the flames shooting up from the laboratory and they had saved all of Saxby's earthquakes.

"God bless them!" he ejaculated as Isabel read him that bit.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she consoled. "Were you insured?"

"Heavily. But it doesn't matter. I'll be in China in four weeks from today."

5

WHITE LILY

EINSTEIN HAS REMARKED THAT ANY BLOCKhead can draw correct conclusions from a consistent theory, but that it requires genius to deduce the truth from one that is full of contradictions. On such authority we cannot deny that old Saxby had genius. Although his theory was not utterly wrong when he left Los Angeles for China, it was a tissue of holes and glaring inconsistencies. Nevertheless, as events proved, he drew the right conclusions.

His hypothesis was what the mathematicians call necessary but not sufficient. Quite logically, and equally inadequately, he reasoned as follows: Tom's Easter egg started everything. Yang, apparently, had been so unfortunate as to reproduce the exact circumstances which had initiated all the trouble. These included Mrs. Lane's glazed crock. Since all of those necessary—as he thought—conditions now no longer co-existed, having been destroyed by fire and otherwise, it was extremely improbable that anything further of interest could happen in or near Los Angeles. Captain Lane, however, was still open to grave suspicion. He, no doubt, was still "infected"—Saxby used the word for want of better, although it failed to express his thought. Therefore China called him, not Los Angeles or the desert.

Old Saxby should have remembered that as in love, so in science. Unless the time, the place and the girl, or their equivalents, get together somehow there is nothing doing. He had neglected, among other things, the essential element of time. But he was so eager now to seize the likeliest opportunity of verifying his hypothesis and seeing it work before his very eyes, that he hastened to overtake Lane before the latter should lose all his fascinating dangerous qualities.

With a parting assurance to Isabel that nothing much was likely to happen to California in his absence, and a promise that he would never give her husband's unconscious secret away, he packed his grip and caught his steamer. The earthquakes were loaned to the Southwestern Museum until his return. His bank undertook to look after his affairs while he was in China.

"If I don't come back within ten years, the Society of Earthquake Lovers of California is to get everything. You will find the details in my will. Goodbye."

On his way across the Pacific, Old Saxby had ample time to ponder his sins of omission and commission. Yang's laboratory notebook was the first cause of Saxby's qualms. Although by no means the chemist that Yang had been, Saxby was quite respectable and indeed an expert in all the chemistry that pertained to geology. His chemical classification of the basalts, for example, marked an epoch in the science, and his bold theory concerning the origin of the silicates, although openly scoffed at by jealous or less imaginative rivals, at least arrested the attention of chemists. Saxby was nothing if not daring, in thought as well as action. Yang, on the other hand, was a more conservative type of genius, in spite of his weakness for gin. When he theorized—which he rarely did—his speculations had an awkward trick of turning out right. The last, in modern physical science, is almost a miracle. So when Saxby at last thought he understood the pencilings which Yang had scratched on the last page of his notebook, he began to doubt his own wisdom because it contradicted Yang's.

"I wish I had locked up the gin that morning," he sighed. "Poor Yang might have solved the whole problem if he had stayed sober enough to keep out of the laboratory after dark. If there is anything at all in these guesses of his—well, it is too late to turn back now. What a pity Yang died without knowing what he was looking for, or what he found. I wish I had given him a hint. Another of those infernal experimental errors. Confound my luck. I'm always making them."

While Saxby stewed and fumed, another great man of about his own age was also doing his unconscious bit toward the making of history. The venerable Hu—"Hu the Good" as he was called by his followers—was within a year or two of sixty. He looked eighty. For one thing he was pure Chinese; for another he was much too fat, and finally his kind old face was wrinkled like a wad of crumpled parchment. This was the prophet and uncrowned king whom Captain Lane had been ordered to interview.

Long before Lane and his escort of marines reached the Holy Caves where Hu the Good dispensed blessings and absorbed communist propaganda, the footsore men had nicknamed him Who the Devil. It was indeed but a poor play upon words, yet it eased the feelings of the men as they tramped endlessly over sand and rock, or sweated like cattle in unspeakably dirty river boats. Whom the devil they were to civilize, and exactly why they were to do so, were the questions they debated endlessly. Hu the Good had a bad reputation with the Marines weeks before his friends welcomed them to his sanctum.

Hu was truly a good soul. He was benevolence itself and one of the most temperate men that ever lived, even in a peace-loving, moderate China. By faith he was a Moslem, as his fathers before him had been for generations. Indeed his one vanity was the boast, probably just, that it was one of his direct lineal ancestors who first brought the true faith to China.

The children of Allah, as all the world knows, are a war-

like pack, always spoiling for a fight in order to convert the unbelievers—to *their* faith. Hu the Good would have none of this muscular Mohammedanism. He detested it, declaring that it was his mission to bring peace, not a sword, to the farmers and bandits of war-torn China. Yet, in spite of himself, as his powers waned and ever mounting billows of fat submerged his common sense, he began to waver as he approached old age. After all, he declared, there might be something good in this notion of a jehad—the technical term for a holy war (if such a thing is not a contradiction in terms)—of the Mohammedan brand. Were not the unbelievers, white, brown and yellow, tearing one another to pieces in an endeavor to prove that might is right? Why not give all of them a practical demonstration of their own doctrine? They were weary and ripe for instruction. It would be easy to teach them the truth in their present exhausted condition. Then there would be no more infidels. It almost seemed as if Allah himself had turned schoolmaster. And Hu the Good would be Allah's first assistant to teach all Asia, and possibly the whole world, the letters of the Mohammedan alphabet. It was at least as worthy an object as the promotion of free trade. If successful it would open the door, not to China, but to Heaven.

By himself, even in his premature old age, Hu was incapable of hatching so venomous a reptile out of an innocent egg. It is a pity that he grew so fat after he passed fifty. Had he weighed only two hundred pounds it is likely that his mind would have remained as shrewd as ever when the agents from Moscow sought by flattery and sham respect to seduce it. But all his vitality was drawn off to keep the blood circulating through a quarter of a ton of solid flesh. Hu's bulk almost equalled his benevolence, and his senescent feeble mindedness surpassed the sum of both. It was but a sorry pair of rogues that succeeded in debauching what was left of the poor old man's intelligence, but they were the best that Moscow could spare. In his prime, when he weighed only a hundred and eighty, Hu

could have swindled them out of their souls in his sleep.

That precious pair of rascals, Liapanouff and Markoff, were the two parasites from Moscow who battened upon poor old Hu. It will be observed that both of them had perfectly good Russian names. Neither was a Russian.

Liapanouff was a fairly able, well-read man of about thirty. He was a dank-haired, pimply, unwholesome looking man, stoutish, with a flat, round face like an underdone pie. He habitually wore enormous, unrimmed glasses with thick lenses that made his humid dark-brown eyes glow like a myopic moth's.

Markoff was about forty. He had resided nine years in London, where his name was Marks, ostensibly as a waiter. His true profession is not mentioned in decent society. In personal appearance Markoff was not absolutely repulsive. His tan hair had not thinned, and his sparse mustache was as youthful as ever. Doubtless he wore it because he had sense enough to know that his mouth gave him away. It was as cruel as a rattlesnake's. His pinched nose recalled a vulture's beak, and his all but transparent ears, pointed like those of a lynx, stuck close to his bulging, bony skull. Taken piecemeal, Markoff was an unattractive mongrel; in the *ensemble* he made quite a striking impression, especially upon women. Unlike Liapanouff, Markoff was an ill-informed, narrow-minded, bigoted ignoramus. Such were the vampires who hung like a pair of parched bats to the enormous Hu, draining him of his common sense.

The gist of Liapanouff and Markoff's mission to Kansu was childishly simple. The "Kansu mission" was delegated to them because they had half mastered spoken Chinese in the shortest time. They were, technically, "provocative agents" on a grand scale. The technique of such agents has seven main operations.

First, find a large class of human beings whom you hate and who are being oppressed by a more powerful class whom you envy. Second, ingratiate your way into the friendship and confidence of the oppressed. Third, incite the oppressed to attack the oppressors against whom they have not a worm's chance

of victory. Fourth, betray all the secrets and plans of the oppressed to the oppressors, thereby winning the confidence of the latter. Fifth, join the oppressors in their overwhelming counter-attack upon the oppressed, but be careful not to venture within a hundred miles of the actual fighting. Sixth, find a more powerful class than that with which you are now affiliated, and repeat the preceding program indefinitely. Seventh, if at any stage of the application of the rules a finite limit is reached, so that no further treachery is possible, swallow your capsule of cyanide of potassium, as the only logical conclusion.

Markoff and Liapanouff were as yet only at the second stage. They had convinced a large mass of the christianized Chinese that their more numerous heathen brothers were walking all over them with wooden clogs. The Mohammedan followers of Hu the Good outnumbered those of the Christian missionaries and their converts twenty to one. The Buddhists and Confucians in their turn were dozens to one against the Mohammedans. After Hu had wiped out the Christians, he and his followers were to get their own medicine.

In all this the westerners would of course suffer heavily. Bourgeois Britain and capitalistic America would be drawn into the row on a huge scale. Asia would end by fighting the rest of the world. The Liapanouffs and the Markoffs would be on the winning side when the gas and flames cleared away, and the statesmen took out their jeweled fountain pens to autograph the treaties. Then the "provocation" would begin all over again, and the victors would find themselves going the way of King Herod. The grand objective for the present was the communization of Asia.

Throughout this vast game Hu the Good was merely a pawn, but the Moscow agents were unduly contemptuous of poor old Hu. They forgot that chess as played by masters often turns upon the gain or loss of one humble pawn. Hu had been a master in his day; old Saxby still played a pretty good game, while Liapanouff and Markoff were handicapped by Markoff's

petty vices which somewhat dulled the expected brilliance of his moves.

The queen of the board was Hu's eighteen-year-old granddaughter, whose pretty Chinese name is equivalent in English to White Lily. She spoke only Chinese. Markoff was endeavoring to teach her enough Russian to make conversation salaciously interesting. As the instruction always took place under Hu's watchful eye, Markoff found his pupil rather dull. He did not get very far with her.

Hu the Good cherished White Lily more tenderly then anything else on earth. Even his religion took the second place when she was near. Small and well formed of body, White Lily was perfect of her kind. Her youthful grace was evident even under the flowered blue of her tunic, and her delicate, oval face was as quaintly piquant as a Chinese fairy's. Her father was Hu's son, her mother a commoner undistinguished for anything but good nature and the fading remains of a once great beauty. Hu's son was just a law-abiding, hardworking farmer on his own land. The shrewd, subtle mind which was Hu's in his prime had skipped a generation. White Lily inherited it. She had an added advantage, which Hu had never possessed. There was never any mistake about him—until he grew too fat. He always looked his proper part—wise, strong, calm and benevolent. White Lily was such a pretty girl that strangers—and many who had known her for years—mistook her for nothing more. Consequently she usually did what she liked with people, and did it charmingly. They frequently were too dazed to know what had happened until long after it was all over.

Under the pretense of seeing that she was becomingly educated—White Lily needed no education—Hu borrowed her from her parents and kept her by his side. As his powers waned, hers waxed. It solaced and yet saddened him to see himself rising from the grave in a beautiful reincarnation. For in his secret thoughts in the long, sleepless silence of the nights, he knew that the great man he had been was dead.

White Lily reciprocated her grandfather's affection. If she did not think much of his technical faith, and still less of his ability as a prophet, she kept her doubts to herself. She was content to let him enjoy his little foibles. They were an old man's weaknesses of no great moment. Provided no cloud rose between them to chill the warmth of their perfect understanding, Hu might start his precious jehad whenever he felt inclined. She herself did not greatly care for the cocksure coolies and beggars who bragged incessantly that they had been converted to a better faith than hers, and who missed no opportunity of telling her that she and the good old Hu must fry forever in Hell. If the jehad should succeed in letting the offensive conceit out of some of these boorish braggarts in this life, she and Hu would gladly take their chances in the next. The converts no doubt were oppressed. On the other hand they were not conspicuous for humility. Therefore White Lily remained, on the whole, neutral.

She knew exactly what the thin-lipped, persistent Markoff was trying to do to her. It rather amused her to think that he believed in his ability to succeed. But it grieved her that Markoff was not a Christian. There could be no equitable grounds for eliminating him in the jehad. Liapanouff she rather liked. He never talked to her of Russian love, which disgusted her, but conversed quite entertainingly of Western culture—its politics, its science and its literature. His Chinese, too, was much better than the intense Markoff's, although the latter's was not half bad. From Liapanouff she also learned—without his knowledge—enough Russian words to follow the general trend of the private conversations between the two agents, particularly when they concerned her. And yet Liapanouff, like Markoff, found her exasperatingly dull in her pitiful attempts to learn Russian. The pasty Liapanouff was more of a dilettante scholar than a diplomat, while Markoff knew too much about women ever to sense when one was making a fool of him.

White Lily turned the pair inside out and read their private

weaknesses as readily as the old augurs used to decipher the entrails of an ox. Ostensibly she was on their side. She saw the spectacle they were making of poor Hu, but kept her knowledge to herself. If the playmate of her babyhood wanted his fun in his second childhood he should have it, for she loved him. So she thought while it was all only a nebulous theory.

Thus the jehad brewed while Lane and his men strove by forced marches to reach Kansu before it was too late, and Saxby fumed and fretted to overtake Lane on what, after all, might turn out to be a foolhardy wild-goose chase. Revolution and counter-revolution made Lane's going delicate and difficult. Warring factions of inflamed patriots tore a once pacifist old China to pieces for their own gain, and religious hatreds smouldered like a chain of volcanoes about to erupt. Europe and America watched the trouble uneasily, but not altogether passively, while Great Britain tried not to see the end of white domination in Asia. All in all it was as busy and as black a day in human affairs as this troubled planet has suffered.

Yet all of this furious fuss was but the mere disorderly running to and fro of an excited community of ants beneath a gigantic foot about to descend and smash them flat. Like the voracious nations of insects, who lack the imagination to combine their armies against their common enemy, man, and who miss their easy victory by fighting among themselves, the swarming hordes of human beings were striving to exterminate one another, all unconscious that their desired ends could be more easily attained by a coalition against their universal enemy, brute nature.

Would the foot descend? Nature is impartial, or perhaps indifferent. A sudden impulse in another direction might urge her aside and let the busy ants live. But if not, and if she kept to her present blind way, the ants would be crushed. Saxby, if urged to bet, would have placed his money against the ants. Nevertheless he was on his way to do the best he could for them.

To a moderately critical mind, he was used to assert, when

feeling blue, the whole sweep of organic evolution, human and otherwise, must appear as the aimless dream of an idiot realized in meaningless action. It remained in this instance to be seen whether nature and evolution can be directed by human intelligence. If not, the stupid game would come to an end forever; if so, it would be the beginning of an end of pessimism.

Such was the setting when Hu the Good brought ten thousand boils to a head by officially prophesying a jehad. The prophecy was equivalent to a command to all faithful followers of Mohammed to slaughter the infidel missionaries and all their converts. The blaze thus started in remote Kansu was—so Hu prophesied—to sweep all China like a grass fire. The holy heat of China was to kindle all Asia, and Asia's conflagration in turn was to sweep the world and consume utterly the last unbeliever. Hu's fat had at last gone to his head.

The prophecy was vouchsafed from the innermost shrine of Hu's vast sanctum, near Teng-shan, in the once famous limestone caverns of Kansu. White Lily smiled fondly on the old man who took his self-imposed office so seriously. His artless importance and his sudden flash of belief in himself were cheap at the cost of a dozen jehads. He was happy. Liapanouff blinked his moth's eyes and moistened his slack lips. Markoff's fanatical face set like a rattlesnake's about to strike. The agents' first task was accomplished. In a few days they could safely start the second by betraying Hu.

At the very beginning of the holy war a slight difficulty arose that threatened to abort the whole jehad, until Markoff's masterly mind found a way out. A jehad is nothing if not swift and vigorous. It must go with a punch or it peters out. Now, unfortunately for Hu's prophecy, the Mohammedans had no firearms and no swords. A few antiquated, inefficient pikes of the seventeenth century were all they could muster. The governor of Kansu had long since sent all the more modern weapons to a personal friend, at the time a general in the army of the revolution. How in the name of Allah were the infidels to be con-

verted under these deplorable conditions? It would take forever, even if the Mohammedans, unarmed, should be strong enough and sufficiently numerous to round up all the unbelievers and feed them a dozen at a time to the pikemen.

Markoff wriggled up to the enormous Hu and whispered a few short sentences, glancing behind him from time to time toward the far darkness of the eastern wall of the cavern. Hu nodded. He had prophesied. If the jehad should fall flat before it even started, Hu's authority as a prophet was over. With a guilty glance toward White Lily, who stood a few yards away demurely trying to overhear what Markoff was whispering, he assented. His reputation would be saved. Markoff slipped away like a snake, and began whispering to Liapanouff, who squatted yellow and damp on the floor of the cave like a diseased toadstool.

White Lily smilingly advanced to coax the truth out of her errant grandfather. She knew that he was feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"Tell me what he said," she entreated, like a child begging for a toy.

Poor old Hu looked troubled, and a slight tremor agitated his vast bulk, to die out in broken ripples on his huge hands.

"It was just a political matter," he muttered in the folds of his chin.

"Was it about the jehad?"

Hu the Good tried to lie. But he could not. All her life White Lily had heard nothing but the truth from his lips. Habit now overmastered him.

"Yes," he admitted. Then, after a pause, "Would you be sorry if my prophecy should turn out to be false?"

"Of course I would. But you are always right, so the jehad must happen. Did Markoff tell you *how* to make it happen?"

Hu did not deny that the thin-lipped reptile had given him more than a hint toward making the prophecy a fact. But, hav-

ing found his courage again, Hu thought it better to tell his granddaughter only the half of Markoff's brilliant scheme.

"These caverns have many chambers, and they are sacred," Hu rumbled as if he were prophesying again. "All the infidels of Kansu might gather in the least of these holy places that my fathers blessed, and be but a handful of sand on the floor. Here, in these hallowed caves, shall the unbelievers hear from my lips that Allah is God and Mohamet his prophet. Then, if they still hug their unbelief, I can do nothing more for them.

"You will not destroy them?"

"How can I? The governor of Kansu has robbed the faithful of their arms."

White Lily was but half convinced. Against reason she hoped that her good old grandfather had at last recovered his sane benevolence. She knew that he had hated bloodshed all his life. Was it too much to believe that the cataracts of old age had rolled back from his eyes for a moment, giving him a vision of his true self?

"There will be no jehad?" she questioned doubtfully.

"I did not say so. But this jehad will be bloodless."

"Even after all the shameful insults those arrogant beggars have flung at you—and at me?"

"Yes, even after all those, and after all their brawling self righteousness that has stirred up hatred and riot in Kansu."

She gave him a long look, but he did not wince. Then, wondering whether she had lost him at last, she turned away without a word.

Markoff and Liapanouff stopped whispering when they saw her coming toward them. She halted within a yard of the squatting pair. Like two whipped curs they furtively watched her face with their eyes, not daring to raise their heads. Liapanouff moistened his loose lips; Markoff's bony jaw set.

"Stand up," she commanded.

They shuffled to their feet, and stood slouching with their hands behind their backs.

"Is there to be a jehad?" she demanded.

The reptilian Markoff, after a swift glance at Liapanouff's mushroom face, took it upon himself to reply. "There will be a bloodless jehad," he answered.

White Lily saw that it would be merely wasting breath to question them further.

"Remember," she warned them, "that I am my grandfather's brains and I am his right hand. What his brain thinks of your jehad will determine what reward his right hand shall give you."

Turning her back abruptly on them she walked rapidly away toward the far crescent of bright yellow that was the sunshine on the hillside beyond the entrance to the cave. Sweating with a cowardly fear they watched her dwindle and pass under the vast arch, a toy figure no taller than a match. The very indefiniteness of her threat, and their uncertainty as to the exact meaning of the idiomatic Chinese in which she had uttered her warning, only multiplied their terror. A cold shiver ran up Markoff's back and his jaw set convulsively.

"Shall we go back to Moscow?" Liapanouff suggested.

"If we go back unsuccessful, we shall be shot." Markoff's snake mouth closed viciously. "We can get away at once after it is over. What can she do? She is a Moslem. The Buddhists and the rest won't listen to her—no! The governor has promised to help us. The Moslems will be wiped out, and she with them, a week after we finish. I shall ask the governor," he concluded with a bestial leer, "to spare her life for a day or two."

Liapanouff, the sedentary scholar and man of zero physical courage, began to suffocate.

"Let us get out of here now and go to the coast, Japan, anywhere——"

"Tch!" Markoff cut him off. "The governor is a fool and a friend of ours. Let us take a walk through the caves instead," he suggested with a cold, ophidian smile. "Over that way."

Linking his arm through the cheesy Liapanouff's, Markoff

dragged the cowardly lump of flesh off toward the shadowy vastness of the cavern's eastern wall.

While the two agents flitted silently as bats from cave to darker cave, dispensing with the torches which long familiarity with their objective made superfluous, White Lily walked unhappily and alone through the afternoon sunshine.

For the first time in her eighteen years White Lily was crossing the great gulf between theory and practice. As long as her grandfather's jehad was only something to be talked about in a large, philosophical way, she had aided and abetted him in his harmless foolishness. Searching her mind now she realized that she had always hated the thing itself, and that she had never dreamed of it actually happening. Hu was after all only a benevolent dreamer, a prophet in the true sense, not a stupid firebrand. And now these vile agents, with their flattery and their incessant suggestions, preying upon the old man's senility, had debauched his intelligence. They had even so far degraded his high honesty that he was now not above putting her off with a half truth. The bloodlessness of the prophesied jehad did not for a moment deceive her. What devilish thing had that snake whispered in her grandfather's ear? All her young sagacity deserted her and she found herself as helpless as a baby before a mathematical equation. She could not solve it. Nevertheless she knew that it had a solution, and an evil one.

What should she do? The true spirit of her grandfather had indeed descended to her. Her hatred of salvation by force of arms was as fierce as ever old Hu's had been. To avert that "bloodless" jehad was her one passion. It should not happen. But how was she to prevent it, when its very nature was unknown to her? At least she could warn the white missionaries to leave Kansu with their converts while there was yet time. She approached the Christian school nestling in its grove of firs at the foot of a long slope, and entered the main room without knocking.

The missionary, a gray-bearded, dreamy-eyed Scotchman,

was just about to dismiss the last batch of his young pupils for the day. Seeing the pretty Chinese girl hesitating by the door, he left his class for a moment to ask her what she wanted. He addressed her in Chinese, as White Lily knew no English, never having attended one of the Christian schools. To his inquiry she replied that the Moslems were about to start a crusade of extermination against all sects but their own.

"I have heard such rumors," the missionary replied. "They are just gossip."

"They are not. The jehad has been prophesied. Do you understand what that means to the Moslems of Kansu?"

The gray-bearded face set like the death-mask of a martyr.

" 'I fear no evil, for He is with me.' "

"But your women, and your children?"

"They will be true to Him."

White Lily shot him a brief, oblique glance of contempt.

"I tell you there is time to escape to the hills where you can hide till your friends come for you. You can bring them to you by the talking wire"—White Lily's description of the electric telegraph which still, presumably connected the main towns of Kansu with the seaports. Unfortunately the revolutionists had destroyed the first three hundred miles from the coast inland, and Kansu was now completely isolated.

The missionary drew himself up.

"Shall I forsake my Christ and my God?"

White Lily turned her back on him and walked out.

6

HU'S FOLLY

LANE'S FLYING SQUADRON DID NOT FLY VERY fast. Transport, never strikingly efficient in the interior of China, was almost hopelessly disorganized by the revolution. Pinched between two hostile armies the marines proceeded most of the way by sufferance only, and were glad to take at any price what the Chinese officers left. Lane's orders were to reach Kansu and rescue the missionaries without firing a shot unless driven to the extreme of self defense. Any other course would have been suicidal; either of the rival Chinese generals could have annihilated the intruders with a gesture. So long as the Americans minded their own business they were free to go as they pleased. Should some get plugged by stray bullets it was no more than they could expect, and the fault would not be China's. The column was armed only with rifles; tanks and machine guns were left behind, partly to humor the Chinese army officers, partly to make speed at least half way possible.

The telegraph service, like the transport, was practically non-existent. Either the native operators had been shot by one faction or the other, or each side had tried to better its rival's record in pulling up poles and cutting wires. There was of course no wireless for the use of outsiders. Not till he was in far western Shen-si, within fifty miles of the border of Kansu,

did Lane succeed in getting a message through to Teng-shan. The last fifty miles of the line were intact, as was also the beady-eyed Chinese boy tapping the key. Lane asked the operator to call the Protestant mission station at Teng-shan and ask how things were going. The day operator at the other end, evidently a Moslem, replied cheerfully that the province of Kansu as a whole was doing as well as could be expected, although perhaps a little too slowly.

"The jehad of Hu the Good," the operator concluded blithely, "will not leave one infidel's head upon his neck."

"All right," Lane remarked to his first lieutenant, "we shall have to hoof it. No stop till we get there—except for chow."

The men had done twenty-six miles on their feet that day over sand and gravel. Most of them were now dead to the world. On falling out they had dropped off to sleep without waiting for their rations. Before giving the order that set the column into motion like a well-oiled machine, Lane briefly explained the reason for the apparently absurd command. Military discipline did not require that the men know why they were being treated like machines, but common sense did. Lane knew from long experience that an occasional descent to the level of human decency will get the impossible out of a company that is just about done. The column moved briskly off, cursing Hu. The first twenty-five miles before them was a steady grind uphill from 1,500 feet to 6,000 over one of the poorest apologies for a road in all of western China.

At midnight the column halted for thirty minutes at the last telegraph station east of the Kansu boundary line. Lane, his first lieutenant and the interpreter went in search of the operator. They located him in the village gambling den betting on a cockfight.

"What news from Kansu?" Lane asked through his interpreter.

This boy was a Christian convert and knew a few words of English.

"Damn bad," he replied. "You going to Kansu?" he inquired of Lane through the interpreter.

Lane explained his mission and asked whether it would be possible to raise anyone at that hour in Teng-shan. The operator was greatly interested. As a sporting venture he offered to bet that Lane and all of his men would be killed the next day. The stakes could be left in the hands of the gambling den boss. Yes, he thought he could raise the night operator in Teng-shan, provided the Moslems had not yet martyred him. The night operator also was a Christian convert. When the cockfight ended suddenly in the deaths of both combatants, the telegrapher rose obligingly to see what he could do.

In ten minutes he was back, smiling, with a reply. It appeared that the Teng-shan night operator had been trying for four hours to communicate with the outside world. Hearing from his Christian brother over the border in Shen-si that an American column was on its way to rescue the missionaries, he sent them this simple greeting, "For God's sake hurry." The column fell in and proceeded immediately up the barren pass.

No matter what the prize, or what voice calls, there is a limit beyond which human endurance cannot pass. The column went to pieces all of a sudden at sunrise just as it was about to descend the pass into the first long valley of Kansu. Its objective, Teng-shan, was still twenty miles distant. To preserve the proprieties and save at least the shell of military discipline, Lane ordered a four-hour halt. The men flung themselves upon the jagged rocks where they stood. They were asleep before they hit their stony bed. In those four hours, while the men slept, the prophecy of Hu the Good was in part fulfilled.

While the exhausted men slept on the mountain pass, old Saxby, more than a thousand miles away in Shanghai, began definitely to play his part in the drama which was now sweeping to its climax. For the moment he was being buffeted from one unsympathetic official to the next in an almost hopeless attempt to get started on his way after Lane.

"I've been in worse messes than this," he reiterated to keep up his courage. "I'll get there."

The chilly welcome accorded him and his interpreter by the Chinese, American, French and British alike, had its inevitable effect. In spite of himself, Saxby fell a victim to the blackest pessimism. He began to doubt his theory and to suspect that his reward at the end of his intended journey—if he ever got there—would be a large and empty mare's nest. Why the dickens hadn't he stayed in Los Angeles? The desert, the Lane's bungalow, the ashes of Yang's laboratory—any of these offered greater chances of success than anything he might get from Lane. Wishing himself anywhere rather than in China, he dropped into the Army and Navy Club and ordered a bottle of port. As he sat gloomily sipping his wine he went over every detail of his theory with critical disgust. One possible check that he had overlooked in his previous analyses emerged from this searching examination.

"It is probably as wide of the mark as the rest of my guesses," he muttered as he finished the bottle. "Still, I overlooked it. That's bad. If there's nothing in this hypothesis I may as well take the next boat home. Well, it's easily verified one way or the other."

He rose to go in search of the president of the club. It was the president who had introduced old Saxby to the club and got him a "distinguished visitor's" privileges for the length of his stay in Shanghai. When the president saw Saxby coming he tried to dodge. The eminent geologist had made rather a nuisance of himself with his persistent buttonholing of anyone who might possibly help him on his way. Failing to escape, the president made the best of it.

"Not off for Kansu yet, Mr. Saxby?"

"No. And I doubt whether I shall go."

The president brightened. Saxby explained his impending change of heart.

"It all depends on what the Nautical Almanac has to say

about the moon for the third of last month. I know you and the rest of the men here think I'm a lunatic. I am. And to prove it I want to borrow a Nautical Almanac—you must have one. If the almanac says it was impossible for the moon to shine into the east window of a house in Los Angeles on the third of last month at any time between the hours of ten at night and five the next morning, I take the next boat home and leave you in peace. But if the moon did shine into the windows between those hours, I shall be forced to pester you till you send me to Kansu or till I start walking there. You might ask one of the younger naval officers to give me a hand with the necessary calculations while you are about it. You know I'm crazy. Better humor me."

The president humored him. With the help of a dapper young ensign Saxby soon found what he wanted. The moon did shine into the east windows on the third till approximately two hours after midnight, when it passed the zenith and threw the east sides of the houses into shadow.

"That settles it," Saxby exclaimed to the apprehensive president. "I must go on now to Kansu even if I have to walk."

"What has the moon to do with it?" the president asked. Old Saxby did not look like a lunatic, and in ordinary affairs he seemed sharp enough.

"I'll tell you when you talk the Army or the Navy into giving me an escort and an interpreter who won't run home when he hears the bullets singing. How about it? Can't you see I'm no fool? I tell you, on my word of honor backed by the full force of my scientific reputation—you can check up on that much—that I know what I'm talking about. This potty little revolution that all you fellows are making such a fuss over is nothing to what *may* happen if I don't get to Kansu in pretty short order. Mind, I don't say that it *will* happen; I only say it *may*. And further, the moon may have nothing to do with the case. It is a mere hypothesis that I overlooked. Still, since the moon does not contradict me, I feel more confident that I'm

on the right track. Half an hour ago I was clear down in the dumps. Now I feel I'm right in the main, although possibly wrong on every detail."

The president and the ensign exchanged a furtive glance. The emphatic old chap was clearly daft. How could they rid the club of him without raising a scandal?

"I suppose you can't give us any hint why all this secrecy is necessary?" the president suggested.

"That much is easy. As you can verify by looking in *Who's Who,* I have been a bachelor all my life. I know nothing about women. Still, I believe it is not the thing to let a woman down when she honors you with her confidence. Anyhow, I'm an easy mark for any woman who asks me to do something for her. I promised one that I would never tell on her—"

"Ah," the ensign and the president commented in unison. Here was something they thought they could understand. "Husband," Saxby concluded.

"Oh," they remarked, somewhat crestfallen.

"Because," Saxby continued, "he would probably be shot if I did. There you have it all. If I tell all I know, an innocent man, technically guilty, may lose his life. That is one reason I hold my tongue. Another, more important, is this: If I go off half cocked, there will be a blue panic all over the United States and Asia. My objective is to destroy the very real grounds for such a panic—if they still exist—as quietly as possible. Any army or navy man knows what a panic among the civilian population will do to the forces at the front when the enemy is about to start his grand offensive. My situation is exactly similar. Now, when can I get away for Kansu?"

The president's efforts to "humor" his guest were only half-hearted. He was beginning to believe that this self-assertive man should be taken at his own valuation.

"I don't see what the moon has to do with your problem," he concluded, "unless it helps you in some way to fix the date of a crime—say the theft of an important document." He shot

Saxby a keen glance. "The Moscow reds are not mixed up in all this by any chance?"

The activities of the communist agents in all departments of the Chinese armies during the revolution were common and disquieting knowledge not only to military men but to every civilian on the streets. Moscow was more feared than the whole of China, and for obvious reasons. Was Saxby hinting at some vast communist plot which he alone was in a position to nullify? If so, why had he not come with proper credentials from the United States Government? Was he perhaps a secret agent of the Government, on a mission so delicate and so dangerous that no Government department or cabinet officer could risk sponsoring him and being found out if Saxby should fall down on his job? Saxby was not blind before his ludicrous opportunity. The anti-red nervousness had delivered the president and his military friends into Saxby's hands.

"I can say nothing as to that," he declared guiltily.

Old Saxby, of course, was speaking the literal truth. He could not say anything about the possibility of the Moscow communists being involved in his project because he knew nothing whatever about them and, until the president obligingly mentioned them, had never given them a thought. He now concentrated his whole mind on Moscow, communist propaganda and the redder shades of anarchy, in order to look as guilty as possible. The ensign and the president were studying his face as attentively as if it were a map of the whole world's future history.

"You couldn't even drop a hint, I suppose?" the ensign suggested.

Saxby mumbled something indistinct in which the sacred phrase "word of honor" seemed to occur. He looked as if he were about to be hanged. In a burst of candor he glanced up suddenly and looked the president squarely and manfully in the eyes.

"You understand, however, that I must get to Kansu in the

shortest time possible, don't you?"

The president would not admit in so many words that he did.

"I shall have a talk with General Maitland," he promised vaguely.

"May I urge," old Saxby begged, his face as solemn as an undertaker's, "that you do so without further delay? Although I can tell the general no more than what I have told you, I shall be glad to lay my case before him. You will find me in the lounge when the general wants me."

He marched off to the lounge before the president could say yea or nay. In half an hour he was paged, as he had expected to be. He was now thoroughly primed for his part.

Old Saxby knew "Hardboiled Maitland" well by reputation. Maitland was a queer mixture. When not actively fighting, but only planning to fight, he was a martyr to nerves. In these trying interludes he earned a fearsome reputation for drastic severity with his men. The least infraction of discipline meant court-martial. So heavily addicted was he to this form of relief that his more level-headed colleagues on the staff used to call him "Courtmartial Harry" behind his back. But, in spite of his faults, Maitland was a competent soldier, if not a brilliant general. Given a definite, hard task to perform, he snapped into action and forgot himself and his nerves. As it was Maitland's personal eccentricities that, in the last analysis, encouraged Nature's worst, and as the same idiosyncrasies helped in no small measure to undo the damage in the final phase, he may be given at least a positive mark of merit for his share in the crisis. Many a better known man came out of the World War with only a doubtful zero.

The interview was an extremely harassing experience for the general. At dropping nebulous, disquieting hints old Saxby proved himself a past-master. In all the six hours he spent that evening conferring with the general and his staff, Saxby said precisely nothing that meant anything definite. The very vague-

ness of his attitude was its most disturbing quality. More than once in that long grilling the general glanced uneasily round the room as if to detect Russian spies behind the silk hangings.

When the boy entered with a tray of highballs for which the general himself had rung, Maitland demanded in a loud, military tone why the devil the boy kept wandering in and out of the room without knocking. It was a hectic night for an overwrought man whose duty compelled him to sit on the safety valve of half a dozen anarchistic revolutions. To aid the general in acquiring a proper frame of mind, Saxby waited till his host's head was turned and then shot his glass to the tile floor. Applied psychology is a great force for good—if applied at the right time. The general jumped as if bombed from below. Thereafter he was old Saxby's meat.

Lane's footsore men, refreshed by their four hours' sleep and a full meal, were swinging down the pass toward Teng-shan, still fifteen miles distant, when Markoff, with a thin smile, turned to the pasty Liapanouff and gave him his parting instructions.

"Now for that fat fool Hu. Stay here and talk to him while I go to the governor. Don't let White Lily run away. She looks as if she needed attention," he concluded with a leer, nodding toward the girl. Her huddled body lay prostrate with grief and horror at her grandfather's feet.

Liapanouff blabbered some reply and moved off to do his dirty duty. He walked slowly, for his knees felt as weak as water. No mere remorse for what he and Markoff had done caused his debility. A lively apprehension of what might happen to his own flabby neck, should the fanatical Moslems take a fancy to him, made him the sweating pulp he was. For he too was an "infidel" to the Mohammedans. The vast caverns of the outer caves were now packed with yelling mobs whose fanatical hatred Liapanouff himself had helped to fan into flame. Now he would have given ten minutes of his life—not the proverbial ten years, for Liapanouff was too great a coward ever to visualize

himself voluntarily letting go of life—to put out that blood-thirsty, flesh-hungry fire of his own kindling. His greatest chance of safety was at the side of the prophet Hu.

The old man sat dazed and blind in the glare of a thousand torches, trying to recall what in God's name he had done, and wondering why in the name of God he had done it. Liapanouff approached like a bloated leper and laid one damp, white hand on Hu's vast forearm. The huge face turned and loomed before Liapanouff's. Through the Russian's clouded mind flashed a memory of a setting sun he had once seen when a boy on the wintry steppes. The prophet's face flickered in the torchlight as that watery sun had flickered before it abandoned the world to the iron grip of a merciless cold. Brushing the memory aside he began to babble. Hu gave no sign that he comprehended either the agent's sickly flatteries or the fanatical shouts of his faithful followers. He turned away his face from the Russian's and stared stonily at the misty eastern wall of the cavern.

Liapanouff moistened his lips and swallowed nervously. He had had enough. The certainty that he would get more if Markoff's negotiations with the governor of Kansu should miscarry in a certain detail, impelled him to mercy. The chance of failure on Markoff's part was all but negligible. Still, Hu *might* escape with a body of followers sufficient to repay one debt before he died. Better risk Markoff's cold anger than face Hu's Chinese fury if the one chance in a million should mature. The Chinese mind has a natural genius for devising strange forms of death. Liapanouff did not wish to be Hu's inspiration in case the improbable happened and Hu escaped for a day or a week. He stirred White Lily fearfully with his foot.

Thinking it was her grandfather who had touched her, she looked up, her eyes dim with tears, and saw Liapanouff. With a shudder of disgust she buried her face in her arms. Liapanouff bent over her, shaking in the uncontrollable uprush of a dozen clutching fears.

"Leave the caves at once," he whispered, "Markoff—"

He could say no more, choked by his cowardice. After all, Hu could not escape. Markoff would succeed. If Liapanouff let White Lily go, his life would be at Markoff's mercy—and Markoff had none. Liapanouff had assisted at the jehad and he knew. White Lily did not stir. Liapanouff ventured no second effort to warn her. His own skin was too sensative.

Hour after hour that strange trio, the broken girl, the stunned old man and the half-fainting agent of a new gospel, remained motionless, while the victorious hosannas of the faithful clanged and reverberated through the vast caverns like a dream of hell, and Markoff rallied his legions for the next betrayal. The "bloodless jehad of Kansu" was already history, and Markoff dwelt by preference in the present and the future. Already he was on the march.

That memorable jehad, now but a troubled memory that would not sleep, had been imagined, put into action, and finished in the short space of forty hours. It began with Markoff's whispered suggestions to Hu. While White Lily fared forth alone to warn the missionaries and earn her rebuke from the lips of one of them, Markoff explained the details of the bloodless jehad to Liapanouff. The two agents wandered far into the secret roots of the mountains in complete darkness, footsore and unafraid, confident of every step of the black way they had traveled a hundred times.

For fifty black miles or more the vast caverns of Kansu honeycombed the limestone mountains with a chambered labyrinth of calcite corridors and pillared halls, each shadowy antrum loftier than the nave of a great cathedral, curiously carved and hollowed from the living rock by water seeping drop by drop down to the subterranean rivers for ages. A tattered tracery of stalactites depended from the arched ceilings of these silent halls like the bleached banners of long forgotten armies, and massive pillars of all but transparent whiteness soared from the undulating pavements to bell out and vanish in the banners. Through

some of these halls the distant rumor of rushing water echoed drowsily, but most were as soundless as the midnight of a desert. In others the oppressive stillness palpitated with a deeper silence, as if the blackness fell away to a bottomless void. These were the "forbidden caves," where the faithful never wandered.

The wise decree that forbade the curious to explore the forbidden caves was an ancient tradition that needed no enforcement. The torches of the first explorers who discovered them revealed these silent caverns for what they were: unsounded wells of darkness. No echo rose when a stone was thrown into those black gulfs. The scream of the condemned criminal hurled down one of those wells thinned and dwindled to silence long before the wretch who emitted it died. Hu the Good abolished this form of capital punishment which his fathers had sanctioned for generations, and the forbidden caves were roped off in eternal darkness.

In preparation for the jehad that was to be bloodless, Markoff and Liapanouff, feeling along the pitchy corridors, found the copper pins driven fast into the rock walls. They undid the knotted ropes, pitched them into the blackness ahead, and laughed. No slap of rope on rock answered. Silently as bats the two agents turned carefully around where they stood and felt their cautious way along the wide corridor of death, back to the main gallery, and thence to the audience hall of the prophet. They had prepared the road; they must now guide the destined travelers.

Without venturing to inform Hu that all was in readiness, they hugged the eastern wall of the audience chamber and flitted out under the crescent of the exit just as the evening shadows fell athwart the eastern hills. Turning to the north, they followed the path that White Lily had taken less than two hours previously.

While the agents toiled that evening to bring about the jehad, Hu sat dreaming alone in the vast entrance hall. For generations the Moslems had dwelt in these sacred caves. Every

foot of the very hall in which the old man dreamed was hallowed by the blood of martyrs who had died for their faith. At first a persecuted handful, the faithful had fled in seasons of massacre to these friendly caves till the blood madness of their enemies abated, when the starving remnant would emerge to cry once more that "There is but one God and Mohammed is his prophet."

The indifference that sooner or later breeds tolerance on all sectarian hatreds preserved the Moslems. They multiplied and prospered. But they never forgot the holy caves that had saved their faith when it scarcely breathed, and the entrance hall became their Mecca. As the decades passed the feeling of awe and reverence mellowed to affection. The faithful found in the caves a warm shelter from the bitter mountain storms, and a haven of peace and comfort for themselves and their beasts. They stabled their cattle and stored the harvest of their fields in the dry caverns, and gradually found themselves living in the caves. The whole vast honeycomb in the limestone mountains became their citadel and their populous metropolis. Mindful of their harried past, the faithful, with a new appreciation of the good things of this life, depracated the itch for martyrdom, trusted nobody, and cultivated human prudence. The narrower entrances were walled up against possible enemies. Only two secret exits, opening miles away on the mountain side, were left unclosed for emergencies. All that entered the subterranean city of the Moslems must pass under the crescent of the audience chamber, where the uncrowned king of forty thousand faithful reigned.

They had prospered and multiplied. But they never forgot their martyrs, whose unavenged blood was still visible by torchlight on the rose quartz floor of their holiest place where, once a year, they celebrated the feast of the dead. Nor could they lightly forget that their first prophet, Mohammed the implacable, put infidels to the sword. A rival, gentler faith, proclaimed the way of peace. Its cocksure converts belied its humane teachings

by prophesying eternal fire for those who rejected it, and by riotous brawls among themselves to settle minute differences of doctrine. These blustering braggarts were ripe for chastisement. Hu had prophesied. They should be chastised and corrected without the shedding of blood, in accordance with their own professed faith.

"It is good," Hu rumbled as he nodded drowsily, exhausted by the incessant labor of keeping the blood circulating through the mountainous billows of his flesh. " 'There is but one—' "

But he was fast asleep. The battle cry of Islam expired in a futile puff on his lips.

While Hu dreamed of a whole world purged of infidels, Markoff and Liapanouff extended the olive branch of mutual understanding and love to the missionaries and their converts. All that evening, and late into the following afternoon, they labored to spread the glad tidings that strife between Moslem and Christian was forever at an end in Kansu. They were spiritual ambassadors, the two agents declared, from Hu the Good, to announce a perpetual truce between the warring sects. More, they offered their late enemies the healing balm of brotherhood. Would not all come early on the morrow to the audience chamber of Hu the Good, to seal the bond of a new friendship and celebrate the same with a feast of love in the less stately caverns? Not only would love in abundance be provided for their refreshment, but succulent food without stint. For a busy week had the most skilful cooks among the followers of Hu the Good toiled to prepare a feast worthy of the occasion and of the hospitable traditions of old China.

This greeting, larded and made enticing to the ragged with liberal promises of bounties beyond belief, was carried joyously by the smiling ambassadors from school to school, from one missionary residence to the next, and from squalid hovels to squalider market places. By the invisible telegraph system of all primitive peoples, the invitation swept the villages for a radius of thirty miles before the ambassadors of a new era of love had

lied eight hours.

By nightfall the mean roads and trackless hillsides were a-crawl with a moving multitude converging toward the crescent mouth of the sacred mountain. By dawn of the appointed feast day the caverns of Kansu were jammed by a milling mob that clamored for the feasting to begin. Markoff and Liapanouff had returned before dawn, but they were not in the yelling crowd.

Not all who were invited to the feast accepted. The Christian telegrapher was not credulous. He stuck to his post and tried to call the governor of Shen-si. Many who would have come gladly were bedridden. Many more were too young to toil up the steep mountainside for a feast of love they could not understand, and more were too heavy to be carried by their mothers. There also were some few cynics who stayed away. Others had plenty to eat at home and did not hunger for heathen love. Of the white missionaries more than one hesitated long before subduing their unworthy doubts of a fellowman's offer of love, and consented only with reluctance to shepherd the glad pilgrimage of their converts. Three refused outright to go. If Hu had repented it was his business to come to them for forgiveness. Two who got as far as the crescent entrance turned back, unable to force their way in. One dreamy-eyed man with a gray beard, who had entered early and who stood near the exit, fled when the killing began.

It was a bloodless jehad. Not a sword was drawn, not a shot fired. An authoritative shouting and concerted waving of flares from the eastern wall of the cavern gained the momentary attention of the clamoring mob in the reception hall. The Moslems were inviting their brothers-to-be to begin the feasting. The flairs receded into the gloomy cavern behind the announcers and a river of humanity streamed into the darkness. Presently the flaring torches reappeared at the sides of the black entrance as if to mark the hospitable portal. The volume of the mob moving slowly but irresistibly forward urged those already in the corridor of death onward to their doom. To the very lip of the

black well the broad sluiceway was lit up by flaring torches stuck securely into copper sockets on the white, glittering walls. Within a hundred feet of the fall the crest of the advancing mob dammed up in sudden panic. Their shouts of terror were drowned in the clamor of the main torrent. All knew now that they were betrayed. A tempest of fanatics armed with staves and stones broke upon the rear and flanks of the packed mob in the audience hall, herding the unarmed multitude to their slaughter. The crescent exit was barred by a regiment of gigantic men yelling the battle cry of Islam. There was but one motion possible, forward. As the tide vanished into the insatiable maw, the cohorts of the prophet swept the adjacent caverns clear of the curious, the laggards and the timid who had come early to explore, and who had dispersed like fallen leaves before the wind down vast galleries when the feasting began.

Once more the tide in the audience hall swelled to its full volume, and again dwindled to a feeble eddy. Again and again as the sweepers worked farther and farther into the labyrinth of caves the living tide rose and fell monotonously. Crest after crest of human river leapt the lip of the bottomless well to flutter out on the void in tattered spray. Not one drop of blood was shed.

Only the memory of it remained. Drunk with victory, the faithful danced before their prophet who had purged Kansu of infidels. He did not hear their hosannas. A sharper clamor, now stilled forever, beat incessantly upon his tortured soul. When it was too late Hu had realized his folly. The sudden onslaught of his fanatical followers, when they burst like a whirlwind upon the flanks of the helpless mob, awoke him to the full horror of what he had done. His prophecy had engendered the slaughter. Rising to his feet he had lifted his mighty voice in all the strength and thunder which his older followers remembered from their youth, and which had not been heard in Kansu for forty years. For ten minutes Hu was young again, strong

and dominant as he had ever been. But he could no more have quenched the mad fury of his followers than he could have put out the fires of all hell with his tears. He commanded, he besought, he prophesied, he wept; they were deaf. Not Mohammed himself could have stemmed that merciless slaughter. Exhausted by futile entreaties, Hu surrendered to his senility and sank back, an old and defeated man, staring blindly at the constant ebb and flow of the human tide. The rise and fall of that struggling mass no doubt had some significance, but what it might be Hu was too old to remember. At last the tide rose no more. The monotonous recurrence of ebb and flow gave way to an eternity of noise. He seemed to be alone in space, isolated in time. Once a white face seemed to be looking up in the extremity of fear into his own. It was a man's face, and familiar. But Hu could not recall whose it was. A huddled body lay at his feet; why did it not move? He knew that it was alive. The world had crashed and gone to pieces. Why did not the interminable echo of its ruin come to an end?

The celebrants petrified suddenly in their mad dance. Had they heard aright? Yes! The gigantic guards at the crescent entrance were shouting a warning that froze the blood in the hot veins of the dancers.

"The yellow banners!"

Markoff was returning with his new friend and dupe, the governor of Kansu. And after him marched a disciplined horde of armed men, who were neither Christian nor Mohammedans, merely Chinese. This was the fine flower of three months' masterly treachery. The Chinese Moslems had annihilated the Chinese Christians and their white friends; the Chinese of the older faiths would wipe out the victors. The yellow banner of the dragon in its turn should go down to defeat.

The advancing horde was well armed. In sending to his friend, the revolutionary general, the arms of the Moslems, the governor of Kansu had squeezed a tax of one rifle in every four. The arms of his own men were thus augmented by enough to

swell his forces by two regiments. They advanced up the sunny mountainside singing.

The sudden cessation of the shouting in the audience chamber roused Hu to his senses. At his feet White Lily still lay like a crushed flower. She had heard the shout of the guards and she knew the meaning of the yellow banners. She did not stir. Why flee? By lying where she was she might drink deep of oblivion and win eternal peace, before the hour was out. As Hu bent down to lift the wilted form the whole of what he had done flashed upon his mind. He straightened up lest his hand defile her.

Liapanouff, hearing the singing of the advancing Chinese, started to creep toward the crescent of yellow sunshine. Hu's huge bulk leaped after him. Again he was a young man. One enormous hand grasped the Russian's right arm and dragged the limp coward back to where White Lily lay. The audience hall was already deserted but for Hu, White Lily and Liapanouff. Like panic-stricken rabbits the Moslems had vanished to seek safety by hiding in the darkest caverns.

"White Lily," Hu said, "If you ever loved me, stand up!"

She stood, but avoided her grandfather's eyes.

"The yellow banners will be here in a few moments," Hu continued. His voice was that of a young man. "I know that you fear them no more than I, for sleep is sweet. If all your love for me is not dead, do what I ask. Take food and water for three days' journey and leave these caves by the hidden way that you know. Make your way to Shen-si and seek out the governor. Tell him all that has happened and ask him in my name to come here and make peace between my people and those who follow the yellow banner of Kansu. There must be no more killing. Blood cannot wipe out blood. I am guilty and I will pay. My people must be spared. Hasten, or you will perish."

She flung herself in his arms.

"I will not leave you. Your death shall be my death."

"Go, if you have ever loved me!"

"I cannot, unless you come with me."

"How can I? This great body of mine would stick in the narrow places. But I will follow by another way."

"You promise?"

"I promise. It is a longer way, but I will join you when I am free. Hurry! They are almost here. Remember my message. Goodbye, my White Lily."

She ran to one of the caves where food and water might be found. Hu watched her out of sight. Confident that she was safe and would bear his message of mercy to the governor of Shen-si, Hu turned to his immediate task. Disregarding the screams and frantic struggles of the thing in his grasp, he dragged it with him toward the eastern wall of the cavern. The first of the avengers leaped through the yellow crescent just as Hu strode like a colossus into the black corridor of death. He shook the breath out of the limp rag in his hand.

"Be quiet! You have earned the wages of folly. If I should kill you I should do no wrong, for you are neither beast nor human."

An occasional torch still glowed somberly in its socket. The pair marking the lip of the well were flickering out fitfully the last remnants of their life.

"Open your eyes and look down," Hu commanded. For perhaps ten seconds he held the white face over the black void. "Have you seen?"

Crazed with fear Liapanouff screamed incoherent prayers which he had not uttered since he was a boy.

"Whatever you say is a lie," Hu cut in coldly. "No man can see the bottom of this pit."

A patter of hurrying footsteps sounded along the corridor behind them.

"Your friends would save you," Hu remarked. He threw the struggling wretch face down on the stone floor and planted one enormous foot firmly on his back. "I am Chinese," he con-

tinued calmly, as he quickly divested himself of his prophet's robes and tossed them far back into the corridor. "My people say it is good for a man's soul that he should die slowly with his eyes open. It is a long way to the bottom of this pit."

He stiffened, listening intently. The rabble of pursuit, headed by the panting Markoff, burst out of the darkness into the dying glow of the torches. Just before he stumbled headlong over the prophet's robes, Markoff saw the naked form of Hu bend swiftly down and grasp Liapanouff by an ankle. For an instant the gigantic Hu dangled the screaming wretch over the abyss. Then he opened his hand. Liapanouff shot from sight and his screams dwindled to silence.

Stepping back five paces to gain momentum, Hu raised his arms high above his head like a swimmer about to dive. Leaping forward he plunged into the black well without uttering a sound.

7

THE DRAGON

TWO MILES FROM TENG-SHAN, AND ABOUT three-quarters of a mile from the entrance to the caves, Lane's men met the first survivor. A gray-bearded man, evidently a missionary judging from his clothes, marched along the road waving his arms and singing in a high falsetto, shrill snatches of hymns. When he saw the column of marines swinging toward him he stopped and peered intently through the late afternoon sunshine as if to read fine script. Having deciphered the invisible words, he broke into a shout of laughter and yelled at the men, "Mohammed is God and Allah is his prophet!"

Lane halted the column and, with his first lieutenant, captured the man. They got nothing out of him beyond curious perversions of the battle cry of Islam, an incoherent torrent of words, and the remark, whispered with an air of great secrecy, that he had denied his master. They turned him loose to wander at will.

"There seems to have been a massacre or something," the lieutenant observed. "Crazy as a loon. Acts as if he were shell-shocked."

Lane agreed, and the column marched on to the cracked singing of "Onward Christian Soldiers" by the madman. He was still singing when they rounded a buttress of the foothills

and swung into full view of Teng-shan and the entrance to the caves.

"It still seems to be going strong," the lieutenant remarked, referring to the jehad. A sharp order brought the men to the double, pounding over the rubble in an oblique ascent to the crescent entrance. The last regiment of the army with the yellow banners was just about to stream into the caves. That tail-end alone outnumbered the marines five to one.

Lane's orders were to provoke no bloodshed. They seemed ludicrously superfluous in the present circumstances. The Chinese were fully armed. One flick of the dragon's tail would wipe Lane's column off the hillside. The huge body of the brute, its real fighting strength, was of course out of sight in the caves. What remained visible was an ample warning to use common sense. Lane decided to halt.

Leaving the column in charge of his subordinate officers, he went forward alone with the interpreter to parley. A white flag, handkerchief or other mark of truce seemed unnecessary. If the Chinese wanted to fire, a piece of cloth wouldn't stop them. Why should it? Lane argued, mistakenly imagining that these men were butchering the missionaries and their converts.

The crawling dragon tail ceased moving. The Chinese officers had noticed the strange troops arriving on their private battlefield. They were too astonished to order a volley, even if such seemed the best policy. The interpreter showed signs of nervousness.

"They will shoot," he muttered, and bolted like a rabbit down the mountainside toward Teng-shan.

Lane paused long enough to speed the fugitive with a parting curse and proceeded toward his objective, wondering how the devil he was to make himself understood. As he was to learn in a moment he needed no interpreter.

A lean vulture of a man in European civilian clothes emerged from his station at the entrance to the caves and advanced to meet the captain.

"Looks like a Russian," Lane remarked to the hillside in general. "Probably a red at that. Well, I guess the boys are in for it."

Markoff opened hostilities at once. It was no accident that had posted him on sentry duty outside the caves while the Chinese marched in. Having witnessed the end of his fellow agent, and not being a man of outstanding courage, Markoff deemed it prudent to return to the exit and wait outside until the last of his new friends entered. He was off with the old love forever, but the old love had not yet been heard from. A sudden flurry of Moslems might well do to him what Hu had done to Liapanouff. Like all diabolically cruel men, Markoff was a physical coward from skin to marrow. He now studied Lane's uniform minutely.

"American?" he screeched.

"Can't hear. Come closer."

"Are you Americans?" Markoff demanded from the comparative safety of thirty feet.

"Marines. Looking for white missionaries. Know any?"

Markoff ignored the inquiry. His rattlesnake jaw set and a mask of fanatical hatred froze on his cruel face.

"The governor orders me to tell you that he will tolerate no capitalistic aggressions in the province of Kansu. Your presence under arms here is an act of war. Surrender unconditionally or be shot down."

A startlingly vivid image of a bungalow in Los Angeles slowly crystalized on the air before Lane's eyes. He saw Isabel reading on the veranda. Four-year-old Tom was dangling a piece of paper at the end of a string before the indifferent nose of the lofty Hoot. Isabel laid her book aside and got up to shift the sprinkler from the lawn to the bed of marigolds. The colors dissolved and the curiously real mirage vanished.

The inconsequential interlude cleared the captain's mind. He could not afford to get killed. Nor could the boys behind him. They were worth more than their life insurance. He must

use his head and bluff it out somehow.

"From Moscow, aren't you?" he asked casually, as if Markoff had not delivered his awkward ultimatum.

"Surrender or be shot!"

Lane appeared to consider. He realized that an appeal to the governor would be futile. Without his own interpreter he was helpless. This red fanatic would translate Lane's questions concerning the missionaries into a declaration of war upon China by the bankers of America. Surrender probably meant death by torture. He temporized.

"Not so fast. All we want is to get track of the white missionaries and escort them back to Shanghai. We met one about a mile back on the road. Where are the rest?"

"In there."

Markoff jerked his head in the direction of the cave. He could not restrain the smile that twisted his lips like a grinning snake's. Lane guessed, but guessed wrong.

"Being killed?"

"No. They're all dead."

"Then what's all this fuss about?"

"A punitive expedition. The Moslems massacred the Christians. These soldiers are Chinese—neither one sect nor the other. The governor is in command. He will stand no religious riots in his province."

"That's a sound policy. Where do you come in?"

"The Moslems murdered my fellow adviser to the governor of Kansu."

"And what was *he* doing?"

"What business is that of an American like you?" Markoff screamed. "Capitalist robbers and murderers! Surrender unconditionally, or I advise the governor to open fire at once."

"All right. I guess what you say goes with him. My orders are not to fire until we are deliberately fired upon. Now, just this for yourself. Those boys behind me will put up one hell of a scrap when you do give the signal. Don't bite off more

than you can chew. The whole United States army and navy are behind us. You know what that means, I guess."

Markoff was listening. Encouraged by the beginning of success, Lane tried a little bluffing. Had the Russian been as sure of himself with the governor as his ultimatum seemed to imply, he would have ordered the firing to begin immediately, instead of listening to a speech.

"The rest of the marines are just a few miles east of us in Shen-si. They will be here tonight or early tomorrow morning. If they find us missing they will hang the governor and chase you as far as Moscow—if you're a good runner. Then one of them will stick a bayonet into you where it hurts most. Better reconsider your ultimatum. Tell the governor we only want to look for the missionaries. Give him my promise that we leave without firing a shot the minute our job is done."

Markoff leered in the captain's face.

"You tell him yourself."

"I would, like a shot," Lane replied indifferently, "if I knew any Chinese."

"Where's your interpreter?"

"Back there with the boys. He was too scared to talk, so I left him behind."

"Call him now."

"Too much bother. You speak English like an Englishman anyway, so what's the use?"

"None. I'll be your interpreter. Come with me."

"No, thanks. If those Chinks shoot me in the back before I reach my men—look out. They'll get you, too."

"I don't think so. Your men are good, but they can't shoot round a corner. I shall retire to the cave. Goodbye."

Lane turned and sauntered unconcernedly back toward the column. The game was up. Well, if he failed to reach his immediate objective the boys would give a good account of themselves. Too bad it had to end this way. If that damned interpreter hadn't bolted things might have gone differently. He

glanced up at the blue sky, involuntarily, like a man about to be executed. The field of his vision included the dip in the mountains which marked the pass from Kansu into Shen-si. Could he believe his eyes? An exclamation burst from his lips. He turned in his tracks and shouted to the retreating Markoff.

"Look there! Coming down over the pass. That's ours!"

Already a faint hum droned on the evening air. The Chinese stood paralyzed with fright. The drone rapidly swelled to a whirring roar and the wings of the huge creature became visible to their staring eyes. With yells of terror their regiment broke and scattered in panic down the mountain side. Not one of those dwellers in primitive Kansu had ever seen a flying dragon that roared and smoked as it outflew the wind. The huge bombing plane swooped directly toward them, circled thrice at full speed low above their fleeing rabble, and soared suddenly upward with a rush to spy out a safe landing place. The terrified Chinese, governor, officers and all, lay stiff with fear where they had fallen, or crawled mechanically over the rubble in search of safety.

"Into the cave!" Lane shouted, not waiting to see where the plane landed.

The marines rushed the entrance without opposition. Markoff, however, had preceded him. Lane caught a fleeting glimpse of him in the dim light trailing the Chinese who fled in all directions into the blacker shadows. They, too, had heard the awful roar of the dragon. In fact the cave acted as a resonator to intensify that terrible sound a hundredfold. In five minutes the marines had the audience hall to themselves. The governor of Kansu was among those who had retreated to Teng-shan.

Lane lost no time in digging in. Guards were posted at the entrance of all the caverns opening into the audience chamber and a double guard at the crescent entrance to the whole vast labyrinth. They located the stores of torches, flares and food. Comfortable beds were dragged out of side caves, and half the men at once turned in for a four-hour sleep while the others

mounted guard. It was better than being in barracks at home.

The governor's soldiers were not the only victims of panic caused by the roaring, smoking dragon. A few minutes after sunset White Lily emerged from the inconspicuous secret exit. This was a black hole, no bigger than a large badger's burrow, in a desolate jumble of shattered rose quartz that had burst through the ancient limestone. Exhausted of body by her long crawl through the last miles of the narrow burrow, and still stunned by the memory of the jehad, she sank down on the rocks and fell fast asleep. Although she had planned to travel all night she could not go on. The natural reaction of her flesh after a day of horror overcame her spirit.

In that brief, deep slumber she lived again the whole eighteen years of her life, including the last day. The clamor of the victims in the cavern again rang in her ears. Then it became a strong, resonant voice prophesying doom for all whose bloodlust makes them lower than the brutes. The voice of her dream gathered volume and prophesied that the innocent brutes who slaughter one another for natural sustenance, and not for the sake of righteousness, shall also perish from the earth. The prophecy became a destroying roar that foretold the end of all plant and animal life. Suddenly she woke in terror, conscious that she was not merely dreaming.

The golden twilight still lingered on the evening air. She must have slept for a few moments. Gleaming like burnished copper in the yellow light the huge body of some strange flying creature cleft the air directly over her head, and straight as an arrow shot with the speed of a dream down the pass toward the entrance to the caves.

She had no conception what it was, or what might be its purpose. A false instinct, bred by her vivid dream on the black memory of the morning, whispered that this monster had left its lair beyond the mountains to avenge the slaughter of the Christians. Did not their teachers prophesy that the angels would descend with flame and sword and judge and damn all un-

believers? She had heard this from the very beggars who threatened her with everlasting fire. Her grandfather was guilty. With his own lips he had sworn to pay the price of his guilt. This fiend of the air had come to collect that price.

"I will pay," she cried. Filled with a new strength she raced down the mountain side and ran as she had never run in her life toward the crescent entrance. "Wait, wait! I am coming."

About half an hour after Lane had posted his sentries, the man on outpost duty in front of the entrance heard resolute footsteps crunching up the mountain side in the dark. At his peremptory challenge the footsteps halted instantly.

"Take me to Captain Lane," a voice shouted through the darkness. "I'm sent here by General Maitland. From my voice I guess you know I'm white. As I know nothing of military etiquette you'll have to use your common sense and pass me. My business is urgent."

After the usual formalities Maitland's messenger was brought before the captain, who stared in astonishment at the hatless, baldheaded elderly man in a baggy alpaca suit.

"May I ask who you are, sir?"

"Jonathan Saxby. Personal messenger from General Maitland. I must deliver my message in private."

"Very well. Come this way."

When they had withdrawn out of earshot of the men, Saxby plunged into the middle of things.

"General Maitland instructed me to convey this verbal order to you: 'If Russian agents cause you any trouble, eliminate them, but use discretion and employ all means in your power to avert a clash between Russia and the United States.' Now," Saxby continued, "I suppose it is clear why General Maitland chose to transmit that order by word of mouth rather than on paper. Code is too easily deciphered. And if you are the man he takes you for, you won't go shooting reds in broad daylight on the village streets."

"All that is obvious enough," Lane remarked. "But what I can't see is this. How did General Maitland know there was a Moscow agent within a thousand miles of here? The Chinese prohibit the use of wireless by foreigners, and the telegraph lines are out for three hundred miles."

"General Maitland didn't know," Saxby replied, "until I told him."

"And how did you find out?"

"Intuition," old Saxby chuckled. "By the way, *are* there any Russians in the neighborhood?"

"One that I know of. There seems to have been another, but the Moslems eliminated him."

Old Saxby burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well, I'm hanged," he choked in his spasm. "There is something in what I made Maitland believe after all. When you get back to Shanghai tell him from me always to act on his nerves."

"Didn't you know of these agents?"

"I? How could I? Moscow means nothing to me. Anyway, I'm here." He stopped suddenly and stood staring at the floor of the cave. All his mirth had evaporated. "This is bad," he said. "The ideal conditions again—limestone and quartz. How long have you been walking about in here?"

"Since your plane landed," Lane replied, thinking he had to deal with a lunatic. "You got us in for the first time."

"Is that the uniform you had on when you left Los Angeles?"

"No." The captain was too dazed to resist answering.

"What did you do with the other one?"

"As the salt water had ruined it—I was pitched into the sea, I suppose you know, when the *Sheridan* sank—I borrowed some clothes from one of the officers on the *Sherman* and chucked my own overboard. Then in Shanghai I got a complete new outfit."

"Shirt, shoes and all?" old Saxby demanded tensely.

"Yes. But what is all this about, anyway?"

"Another experimental error!" Saxby groaned. "I might have known. Of course the immersion in salt water would ruin your clothes. I'm as blind as a bat. Why in thunder didn't I see that before I left Los Angeles? Here endeth my wild-goose chase. Thank Heaven the Russian agents didn't turn out to be a myth. I'll have something to tell Maitland. Well, I had better be going."

He started toward the exit of the cave. In one stride Lane overtook him.

"You might tell me what it's all about before you leave. I'm curious. You don't look cracked."

"I'm not. Merely a bungler, that's all. Oh, by the way, I almost forgot. Your wife asked me to give you her love and tell you to take care of yourself."

"Thanks. But you didn't fly over a thousand miles just to tell me that, did you? According to your own account you went to a lot of trouble to fool the general in order to get here. Again, my wife knew you were coming. There's a big rat under all this. Sergeant!"

The sergeant stepped briskly forward and saluted.

"Put this man under arrest."

"What the devil do you mean?" old Saxby shouted. "I'm not in the army."

"From now on you are. And until you find your tongue you clean the cave—or boil rice."

"I *can't* talk."

"All right. Shut up."

Bedding was found for the prisoner and, disregarding Saxby's protest, the guard made up a bed on the floor. The guard was no amateur at swearing, but old Saxby almost made him blush. Finally the guard had to silence him forcibly as he was disturbing the men asleep. Saxby neither slumbered nor slept.

Barely had Lane disposed of this problem when another was presented to him. Two of the sentries half led, half carried

an exhausted young Chinese girl before him. Her blue tunic was torn and her shoes were mere tatters of rags. One of the men held up his torch so that the captain might see her plainly. He looked into a pair of eyes that had seen death and a face of great beauty that would never lose its fixed tragedy.

"What's the trouble," he asked gently.

In reply she wailed over and over again some phrase in Chinese.

"She evidently knows no English. Damn that interpreter! Bring the prisoner here."

Old Saxby was walked up under guard.

"Know any Chinese?" Lane demanded.

"Not a word."

"Did you bring an interpreter with you?"

Saxby shook his head.

"The pilot and the mechanician are both young fellows in the navy. But, if I may offer a suggestion—"

"Go ahead."

"The telegraph night operator says he is a Christian. He seems to know some English. I left him trying to talk to my boys. They stayed with the plane, of course." He scanned White Lily from head to foot. "This girl seems about all in. If I weren't under arrest I would suggest that you give her my bed. Her feet are nothing but bleeding pulp."

Lane looked down.

"Put her in the prisoner's bed and get hot water to wash her feet. The prisoner will attend to her."

Old Saxby fished into his capacious coat pocket and drew out Yang's notebook and two clean handkerchiefs.

"I've had enough arrest," he remarked, opening the green stained notebook and extracting a small folded paper. "I know when I'm licked, and I'll talk any time you care to listen. This may help you to believe me." He handed Lane the slip of paper. "Is this your wife's handwriting?" He carefully restored the notebook to his pocket.

Lane examined the writing minutely and nodded. The note read, "Believe what the bearer of this paper tells you."

"You are no longer under arrest, Mr. Saxby. I must attend to this first."

The captain ordered the sergeant to take two squads down to Teng-shan, find the telegraph night operator, and bring him at once to the audience chamber. Rejoining Saxby he found the latter standing doubtfully by the side of White Lily's pallet with the handkerchiefs in his hand. A dish of water and antiseptic stood ready by her feet.

"It has just occurred to me that I had better not touch her," Saxby explained. "My hands and these handkerchiefs may be infected. She has evidently run a long distance over flints and broken limestone practically barefoot. I can't take the risk of touching her. Not so long ago I saw a Chinaman come to a very bad end. It is just beginning to dawn on me what may have been directly responsible for his peculiar death. The circumstances of this girl's injuries are much like those of the other case. Hadn't your surgeon better attend to her?"

"He's asleep. All in. Here, I'll do it. I asked you rather than one of the ambulance men to do it because you are older than any of us, and somehow it seemed more decent. Some of these oriental women don't like young men doctors. Let me have your handkerchiefs, will you?"

Saxby hastily thrust them into his pocket.

"That's just the point. I'm convinced now that they're badly infected. So are my hands. I'll explain later. Tear off a piece of her own clothing. She's only half conscious."

Lane tore off a piece of her sleeve and did the best he could.

"That will have to do until the surgeon wakes up. I suppose she's a Christian convert. Naturally she would run to us for protection. There seems to have been a hell of a row—the Russian implied as much. We're too late to be of much use I guess."

They left her moaning. It was not physical pain that distracted her.

"I will pay," she repeated in her own tongue, believing she knew what price would be demanded of her, and not fearing it. She would suffer anything to pay her grandfather's debt and thereby win mercy for her people and eternal oblivion for herself.

"Now," Lane remarked to Saxby, "let's hear what you have to say. First, exactly how did you ever get here?"

Old Saxby, not without a ruffle of pride, recounted how he had worked upon General Maitland's nerves and how the nerves had done the rest.

"The upshot of it was that he packed me off in a bombing plane at six in the morning. We should have been here two hours earlier—it's only a little over a thousand miles—if the pilot hadn't lost his way in the fog over the mountains. It was all plain sailing as long as we could see the rivers. After that it was dead reckoning. Still, he did a good job."

"He saved us. That infernal Russian would have told the Chinese to fire. We might have shot a few hundred before cashing in our chips; but we hadn't a dog's chance of routing them. And I doubt if we can hold this place if they have machine guns—which they probably have. The Russians have been arming the Chinese for the past few years. Well, we shall see. What about the rest of it? Why did my wife write that note?"

"First let me explain why I should prefer to hold my tongue, and why I tried to until you put me under arrest. What I have to say may disturb you about the safety of your own family. In such a mental condition you wouldn't be fit to lead the band at a Sunday school picnic, much less an expedition in a hostile country. You almost certainly would run into danger by not being able to concentrate on your job. Before going farther, I want to emphasize that there is not the slightest ground for worrying about anything in Los Angeles. It was all quiet there when I left, and I feel sure it will remain so. My theory

must be right that far. Again I didn't want to tell you anything because it was unnecessary. The more people who know about what may happen somewhere, somehow, the worse for us all. If one lets it out prematurely the whole world will hear of it. Now, have patience with me. I'm trying to break it gently. I don't want any panic. Must you have the story, or will you let me go back in the morning—provided we have enough gas left?"

Lane laughed. "Let's have the story. From your hints I judge it will be exciting enough to keep me awake. I dare not turn in till daylight—if then. Shoot."

"Very well. You are sitting opposite a man who is more dangerous than a billion tons of dynamite. I may explode at any minute—how, exactly, I don't yet know. But I may. You noticed, of course, that I did not touch the girl? And have you noticed that I am very careful not to touch anything with my hands?" The captain nodded. "All right. I must ask you to lend me a pair of leather gloves. Some of the men must have a pair—any kind will do. I can't hold my hands up indefinitely. The gloves must be leather."

Thinking again that he had to do with a lunatic who needed humoring, but who might have information of some value, Lane sent an orderly to fetch a pair of leather gauntlets from his own kit. When they were brought Saxby held out his hands for Lane to put them on.

"Safety and prophylaxis first. I mustn't touch the outsides. My hands may be infected. If there is a fight and I get killed, don't bury me near sand or limestone. See that my body is burned in the hottest fire you can make, and keep the fire going for at least forty-eight hours. Don't forget. Your wife told you to believe what *I* say. The first thing I say is this: I am not crazy. The second—"

He was interrupted by a sudden disturbance at the entrance. Lane hurried to see what was happening. Saxby followed. They found two of the guards wrestling with a man apparently out

of his mind.

"I must see the Commander!" the man shouted, struggling to get free. "Take me to him. Ten thousand Christians will be slaughtered if—"

"I am in command here," Lane said quietly, confronting the man. "We met you on the road late this afternoon. You were singing. Remember? What's on your mind? Is there going to be another jehad?"

"Another?" the missionary repeated in a daze. "Has there been one?"

"I don't know. A Russian told me there had. He said the dead are in here, somewhere in these caves. They may be, for all I know. We can't search till we find out how strong the enemy is. What do you know about it all? Come over here and sit down."

The gray-bearded man followed obediently. Lane passed within a few feet of the spot where White Lily lay, and went on some yards so that their talking might not disturb her. Glancing back to see if he was followed, he saw the missionary standing like a statue of haggard old age at the foot of White Lily's pallet, staring down at her. Lane joined him.

"Ever see her before?"

"How did she get here?" the man muttered hoarsely. "I left her just before sunset and I know she did not overtake me on the way. I ran."

"Come over here and tell us about it. Things will straighten out as you talk. Now," he resumed when the dazed man had seated himself on an outcrop of ancient granite, "begin at the beginning and let us have it all."

The missionary's account was coherent and apparently straightforward as far as it went. The dates, however, were inverted. He said that two Russians, Liapanouff and Markoff, had issued an invitation to all the Christians of Kansu to seal a pact of perpetual peace with Hu the Good and his Moslem followers. He went on to relate that the Chinese girl, now lying exhausted

but a few feet away, had warned him of treachery, saying that the Christians, once enticed into the caves, were to be massacred. She had told him so that very evening. The jehad, she declared, was to take place the following morning. He had come, the missionary declared, to intercede with the Moslem soldiers and to lay down his life, if necessary, to warn all converts away from the trap.

"You are sure the girl warned you?" Lane asked. "Possibly at the risk of her own life? Her people, I take it, will kill her if they hear of her treachery. That's what it is, you see, from their point of view. Sure this is the same girl?"

"How could I forget her after what she told me?" He stopped suddenly, staring into Lane's face as if he saw a spirit. "Where have I seen you?" he whispered.

"On the road. Just before sunset. Don't you remember?"

The man shook his head, struggling to pierce the black clouds that baffled his memory.

"Ask him if he speaks Chinese," Saxby suggested in a low tone. "Most probably he does, unless he has forgotten how."

"I'm coming to that," Lane replied under his breath. He addressed the missionary. "Perhaps the Chinese girl can tell us something. You speak the language, of course?"

"Like a native. I have taught the gospel fourteen years in Teng-shan."

"That's fine. See what this girl has to say. Ask her what happened after she left you. By the way, you said the names of the Russians were Liapanouff and Markoff?" The man nodded. "One is a lean fellow," Lane continued, "with a sort of hawk face and a ratty mustache—brown, like his hair. Which is he?"

"Markoff."

Lane turned to Saxby.

"That's the bird behind us somewhere in these caves with an army of crazy Chinks. I think I'll act on General Maitland's orders and shoot Markoff on sight. He seems to be a bad egg."

The missionary was bending over White Lily, peering into her eyes. Seeing who confronted her, and imagining that the avenger of the Christians had come to lead her to death, she sprang up with an eager cry.

"What does she say?" Lane asked quietly.

"She says she will pay."

"For what?"

In reply to the dazed old man's cross-questions White Lily told him with ghastly brevity exactly what had happened. They might kill her, she concluded, if they would spare her grandfather. He was not responsible for the jehad; he had tried to stop it when it began. He was an old man, not strong of mind. She was more to blame than he, for she had humored his childish fancy when Markoff and Liapanouff corrupted him by months of flattery and suggestion. In exchange for her life she asked that they promise not to harm her grandfather, and that the governor of Kansu be made to prohibit any killing of Moslems in reprisal. Hu himself had said that blood cannot wipe out blood, also that he alone was guilty. She, not Hu, was guilty; let her punishment settle the score forever. They might throw her into the well of darkness at once. She was ready, and would be glad to forget it all.

When the missionary finished his translation Saxby and the captain cross-examined White Lily sharply concerning the details of the jehad, asking finally for an estimate of the number slaughtered.

"She says ten thousand."

"Clearly an exaggeration," Lane commented. "There never were that many converts in the whole of western China. The rest of her story hangs together. She hasn't contradicted herself once on cross-examination."

"Not once," Saxby agreed. "Her ten thousand is natural enough. To anyone with the instincts of a human being the number must have seemed practically infinite. If this is the sort of thing our race—for these fiends were men like ourselves—

is capable of," he continued savagely, "I feel tempted to let nature take its course and wipe out our kind forever. The only excuse for not doing so is the fact that occasionally our human race does breed something better—like this Chinese girl. We must prevent these Chinamen from butchering the Moslems next. She has earned that much from us."

He was cut short by the ecstatic singing of the madman.

" 'Ten thousand times ten thousand
Are clad in robes of white—' "

"Shut up!" Lane ordered. "Tell this girl that neither she nor her grandfather will be killed. My men will permit no reprisals. Tell her we do this merely because she has shown us how."

"Are the guilty not to be punished?" the missionary demanded.

"Certainly. But not by murder, either wholesale or retail, with one possible exception. The Russian agents seem to be responsible. One is dead. The other will be captured. We shall give him all the rights of a court-martial. If he is found guilty he will be executed. If you have an ounce of common sense you will see that the girl, or her grandfather, is right. The moment the governor's men start killing the Moslems—at the very first reprisal—a religious war will break out here and it won't end till the whole of Asia, including Russia, and most of the rest of the world is drenched in blood. I'm going to use my horse sense. Never mind the law of the case. Now give the girl my message and give it straight. If I find out that you have made any mistake I'll put you under arrest. I expect another interpreter of my own here by sunrise or very shortly after."

As surly as a bear the scowling madman translated Lane's message.

When she grasped its meaning White Lily flung herself at Lane's feet.

"You did it," he said. "I wish you could understand Eng-

lish. Don't thank me."

They left her to herself.

As they walked away, the madman began expostulating.

"I shall go to the governor myself!" he finally shouted in an insane passion.

"No you won't," Lane snapped. "Corporal! Put this man under arrest. He is not to be let out of this cave until we leave. Treat him decently. He's sick in the head."

"What will you do if the governor attacks?" Saxby asked when they were alone.

"He won't. I have other plans. But, if the worst comes to the worst, you must fly back as far as your gas will take you and make the rest of the journey any way you can. Tell General Maitland the whole story. He will know what to do. But I doubt whether the full threat of the whole allied armies and navies will be able to put out the fire if it once starts. I'm betting that it won't, but I'll have to step lively to prevent it. You stay here and keep an eye on that missionary. If he starts making speeches, clout him. I don't want the boys to get a false view of the situation. They'll fight the Chinese better if they don't know the whole story. If those men return with the telegraph operator before I get back, take charge of him, too. Now, there's nothing to be frightened of while I'm away. This place is a natural fortress and we're on the inside. The first lieutenant will be in command. He has a level head. In case of trouble, do exactly what he tells you to do, and do it in a hurry. Well, I'm off."

"Where are you going?"

"Tell you when I see you."

Saxby watched the captain waken twenty picked men to accompany him on his hazardous mission. They marched out of the cave just as dawn streaked the sky.

8

LANE'S CARDS

LIKE MANY OF THE GREATEST COMMANDERS in history, Lane believed firmly in taking the offensive and keeping it. The Chinese outnumbered the marines at least a hundred to one. Should the governor of Kansu order an attack as soon as his men recovered from their fright, the Americans would be wiped out in half an hour. Although the captain had declared to Saxby that the position of the marines in the cave was impregnable, as a soldier he knew better. A few machine guns in the hands of strategically placed Chinese would clear the entrance in two minutes and then would keep it clear. A resolute leader who did not mind the loss of some hundreds of his men—provided his own life was not thereby endangered—could take the cave in a rush any time he cared to give the order. Lane and his twenty men were now on their desperate mission to plant a bomb under the governor's probable strategy.

On a long, smooth slope about half a mile south of Tengshan they spied the bombing plane resting comfortably on the stubble like an enormous grasshopper. Ordering the men to proceed to the town slowly, so that he might overtake them, Lane detoured to interview the pilot. The plane had the sunny slope to itself; not a sightseer was visible.

The mechanic was on guard. He saw Lane coming and woke the pilot. Lane went straight to the point.

"How much gas have you left—how many miles?"

"Enough for seventeen hundred under good flying conditions," the pilot replied. "Less, of course, against strong headwinds."

"Fine!" Lane exclaimed. "You have plenty to fly back to Shanghai and do five hundred miles of stunts. I may want you to stage a show here. You can see the entrance to the caves. One of you keep an eye on it with your glasses all day. Take it in spells. I'll be going back in about an hour. You know how to read our wig-wag signals? All right; there will be a man with a white flag posted outside the cave. If he starts signaling get the message and act on it immediately."

"Can you give us some idea of what we shall have to do?"

"No, because I don't know myself. It may be nothing. Be prepared for anything. By the way, have you any bombs?"

"Four. But our orders were to drop none unless we were attacked by anti-aircraft fire in flying over the Chinese lines."

"Never mind that. Technically you will be attacked if I call for bombs. Most likely I shall need only some fireworks to scare the tar out of the Chinese. If I call for stunts, do your damndest and put on a real show. Scare the livers out of them. I'll send you rations and fresh water as soon as I get back to the cave. Keep the Chinese away by starting up your engines and making all the noise you know how if they get curious."

He hurried off to overtake his men. Entering the town they met the exhausted sergeant and his two squads, still searching fruitlessly for the telegraph operator. Lane explained that they now had an interpreter at the caves and ordered the men to return there and rest. As he and his twenty men marched up what seemed the main street, indifferent Chinese slouched to the doorways and followed the foreign devils with lacklustre eyes. Not a Chinese soldier was in sight. "It looks like a trap," Lane remarked to himself. Then, to a corporal, "follow that

line of telegraph poles."

Guessing that the operator would be in his place of business, Lane kept his eyes open for the telegraph office. He found it without difficulty by noting where a small cable connected a shabby building with the wires. The door was not locked. Striding in, Lane bagged his bird, or rather a brace. His own recreant interpreter was chatting with the night operator, whose "watch" lasted till ten o'clock. The captain contented himself with a single well-placed kick and turned the deserter over to his men. From the night operator he learned the location of the governor's palace.

"You come along and show us the way," Lane ordered. "You say you're a nice missionary boy. Now prove it by not getting lost, or I'll show you a short cut to Heaven."

Nearing the governor's palace on the outskirts of the town they understood why they had seen no soldiers on their search through the streets. The entire tail of the governor's army was camped around and in the palace grounds to protect his sacred person from foreign aggression. The governor had not yet recovered from his fright at the smoking dragon. He realized now, of course, that it was no supernatural monster, as the inquisitive and cultured telegraph operator, who knew all about airplanes from the missionaries, had told him so late the previous evening. But he rightly suspected it of being some devilish new kind of war bird capable of laying more infernal eggs than any that even a Chinaman has dreamed of.

The Chinese sentries promptly halted the marines. Lane played his first card. Through his interpreter he ordered—he did not make the mistake of asking—the officer in charge of the sentries to tell the governor that the commander of the American forces demanded an instant audience. The officer obeyed. He was absent fifteen minutes. During that uneasy wait Lane took time to note that the Chinese had more machine guns—evidently of Russian make—than they could possibly require, also that their rifles were of the latest pattern. Their supply of ammunition

was ample, not to say prodigal. The wooden boxes containing the reserve supply were stenciled with both Chinese and Russian characters.

When the envoy returned, he informed Lane through the interpreter that the governor would receive him on two conditions. First, Lane and his interpreter alone would be admitted to the august presence provided they left all their arms with the Chinese sentries at the gate. Second, during the conference, the Americans at the gate were to surrender their arms to the Chinese sentries.

Lane accepted these terms without argument. He felt that the governor would offer no better.

"If I'm not back in twenty minutes," he told the men, "walk away as if nothing had happened. Go back to the caves. I shan't be following."

The governor, attired in a loose yellow robe, gorgeously embroidered, was seated behind a long teakwood table in a large, heavily beamed room as bare as an empty barn. Behind him a fully armed guard of six men stood stiffly at attention. Taking no chance on the interpreter's nerves, the captain grabbed him by the arm and hustled him to the table.

"Tell the governor this," he ordered. To emphasize his remarks he banged his fist on the table directly under the governor's nose and began shouting in his angriest tones.

"You have let your people murder American missionaries. I place you under arrest and I order you now to come with me and stand courtmartial in the cave where you butchered them."

The governor, who had jumped six inches when Lane banged the table, turned the color of his robe when the interpreter translated the bluff. His reply was a feeble attempt to prove an alibi.

"He says the Moslems killed the missionaries."

"Tell him," Lane roared, "not to argue! The Moslems who killed the Christians are Chinese. As governor of Kansu he is responsible."

The governor's color improved somewhat. He turned a purplish green. The blood was finding its way again to his brain. He pondered Lane's legal theories in silence. Then, having glanced behind him to see that the guards were still there, he put his simple, disconcerting question through the interpreter.

"Why should I go to the caves?"

With the air of a humane judge informing a murderer precisely why it was his painful duty to impose the death penalty, Lane explained in a level voice.

"Tell him this, bit by bit. Tell it slowly, so he will understand it all. First, if I am not back at the airplane within a certain time, the two men in it have orders to blow Teng-shan off the face of the earth. They will fly high and drop their bombs out of a clear sky. The people of Teng-shan, including the governor of Kansu, won't even see the plane—it will be so high. But they will know it is somewhere in the sky when the first bomb hits this palace. Second, if I pass the plane without the governor, and if a single one of his soldiers is seen following me and my men back to the cave, the plane will at once fly back over the pass into Shen-si. We are only the advance column of a very strong American force—easily able to wipe out the Kansu army in a morning engagement. But our main army will probably not have to advance at all. There are five hundred bombing planes with it. The planes will fly back and forth over the pass for a week, or for longer if necessary, until they have bombed every farm house, village and town in Kansu into a dusty hole in the ground. That's all."

From the expression on the governor's face as he absorbed sentence after sentence of the ultimatum, Lane believed that the bluff had worked. With an air of unconcern he sauntered toward the door, expecting the governor to follow him. The governor, however, did nothing of the kind. To his horror Lane heard the governor and the interpreter exchanging a rapid cross-fire of questions and answers. What could it mean? The interpreter suddenly shot past on his way to the door.

"Halt!" Lane shouted.

Involuntarily the interpreter halted. Taking two strides forward Lane grasped him by the back of the neck and shook the wind out of him.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't tell."

"Why not? Spill it, or I'll break your neck!"

"The governor's soldiers will shoot me if I tell. Let go!"

Lane felt himself seized from behind. The governor's guards were not asleep. One banged the butt end of his rifle down hard on the captain's wrists and the interpreter bolted. The governor was not only more or less of a gentleman but also an extremely cautious man. At a word from him the guards let Lane go. It would be unwise, the governor believed, to abuse this blustering American until the exact value of his threats was ascertained.

Presently the interpreter returned, followed closely by the telegraph night operator. In a flash Lane saw what was about to happen. He played his last desperate card. If this failed to take the trick he was cleaned out. The telegraph operator had declared that he was a Christian convert. His knowledge of English, however, was not extensive. Gambling on the chance that the boy would understand, and that he was indeed on the side of the missionaries, Lane deliberately chose the simplest words he could find to phrase his plea to the operator.

"Tell this man," he pointed to the governor, "the truth. The man in Shen-si will tell you we have a big army there with five hundred airplanes. Tell him this when you come back." Lane was careful not to let his own interpreter overhear.

An all but imperceptible flicker of an eyelid is more eloquent than volumes of oratory. The operator caught Lane's. He understood exactly what he was being asked to do. Would he do it, or had the missionaries ruined his native genius for lying? Lane silently prayed that the operator might still be an artless child of China. The governor was no fool.

"What did the American say to you then?" he demanded.

A look of almost angelic piety lit up the operator's face. "He told me to tell you the truth."

"Then ask him for me whether there is time for you to telegraph to Shen-si before the plane begins to drop bombs."

Lane replied that he thought there would be time. The governor took the chance, but told the operator to run all the way to the telegraph office and not to dally on the way back.

Either by instinct or from a Chinese sense of humor the operator took all the time he needed in the office. Lane expected him back in forty minutes. A full hour passed. The captain began to smile. He glanced suggestively at his wrist watch. The governor fidgeted. Lane believed the operator was having his little joke on the governor. The more intense the suspense the greater would be the relief with which the governor would choose courtmartial instead of bombing. But as the hour lengthened to two, Lane felt that the joke was going too far. By signs he prevailed upon the governor to send one of his guards to see what had happened to the operator. They met just outside the door.

"Is it true?" the governor demanded.

The operator, breathless from his long run, struggled to reply.

"It is true," he panted. "All western Shen-si is full of American soldiers. They have big guns and five hundred airplanes."

The governor rose hastily. With an air of well-controlled anxiety Lane pointed to his watch, then to the beamed ceiling of the room. The governor ran. At the door Lane glanced back at the operator.

"Come to the caves tonight. We'll take you back with us."

The operator's face was a beautiful mean between the Mona Lisa smile and a subtle Chinese grin. He had told the truth as he saw it, and he was pleased with himself. The big guns were his own contribution.

"You not know me," he remarked. "Other night I tell you over wire in Shen-si for God's sake hurry."

At the palace gate Lane and the shaken governor found the twenty marines hanging about and looking sheepish. Two hours had passed.

"I thought I told you to go back to the caves," Lane snapped, "if I didn't come out in twenty minutes."

"Our watches all stopped five minutes after you left, sir," the corporal informed him, offering his as evidence.

"Fall in, and march ahead of us to the caves," Lane ordered sharply. He thought it best to ignore the remarkable coincidence of twenty watches stopping simultaneously. The men grabbed their rifles from the governor's guards and obeyed.

Forty minutes later, old Saxby, anxiously scanning the slope up from the town through the lieutenant's field glasses, made out Lane's men marching rapidly toward the caves. A few paces behind the men Lane was trying to keep up. A stoutish man whose resplendent yellow robe outblazed the morning sun was leaning heavily on the captain's arm and impeding his progress. Saxby guessed.

"By Jove!" he shouted to the sentry behind him, "the captain has captured the governor of Kansu."

Old Saxby had become panicky at the long absence of Lane's party, and had left White Lily in charge of the surgeon, to go out and keep watch for the captain. In case of visible danger in the town he was to report at once to the lieutenant in the cave. Seeing that all was now rather better than well, he sprinted back to the cave to tell the lieutenant.

"They ought to make him a field marshal or something for this," he concluded enthusiastically. "That boy has a head on his shoulders. With the governor in here as hostage we can send the missionary into these black holes to tell the Chinese to come out. Then the governor can send them all home. We'll keep him till we don't need him any longer—say half way across Shen-si. And we needn't let him go until he gives us a

cast-iron guarantee that he won't touch the Moslems when he gets back to Teng-shan. We—"

"Zing!" a bullet sang as it just kissed Saxby's ear and passed on.

The staccato commands of the lieutenant were drowned in the instant uproar that burst upon the silence of the audience chamber from a hundred black galleries. Mobs of yelling, shouting Chinese soldiers boiled into the chamber from the caverns like a sudden eruption of vermin swarming over a carcass. The guards at the entrance to the rock caverns were swept aside like chips and hurled back against the walls. Saxby found himself isolated a few feet from White Lily. His instinctive thought was of her safety. She was small; he was strong, and his blood was up. He tucked her under one arm, seized a heavy torch with his free hand, and started to follow the main body of the marines who were retreating toward the eastern wall of the cavern. This chanced at the moment to be the nearest objective offering protection for their backs.

"Hold your fire!" the lieutenant shouted, seeing Saxby and his burden directly in the line of fire.

The front of the advancing horde parted in the middle and a flying wedge of gigantic Chinamen issued from the gap and shot like an arrow toward Saxby; a sudden surge forward of the right wing of the enemy completely cut off his retreat. Saxby found himself with his back to a thousand yelling Chinese and his face to the racing wedge. He dropped White Lily at his feet and grasped the torch with both hands. The head of the wedge misjudged its mark. The leader saw only an old man with a stick. He saw nothing more, because Saxby's torch caught him full whack on the side of his skull and broke his neck. The next got a shattered arm. The third, quick witted, and more agile than his predecessor, swooped low, grasped White Lily's tunic with one hand, snatched her to his body, and fled like a streak before Saxby could swing at him. Two more were disposed of before the torch snapped in his hands. For a sixty-

year-old man he had put up a pretty good fight. He realized that it was all over. His one regret was that he did not have a revolver. For it had not escaped his notice that the flying wedge carried no arms. Their orders, therefore, were to capture, not to destroy the enemy. Saxby guessed who had given the order. From Markoff's record in the caves it was but reasonable to expect an unpleasant death.

Instinct forced him to fight to the last ounce of his strength, although reason coolly told him it was useless to struggle. Obedient to their orders, and anticipating a prolonged feast of cruelty, the Chinese took great care not to injure their captive. They produced short cords, trussed him up like a turkey about to be roasted, and carried him off swinging from a pole between two sturdy porters.

A sudden lull in the pandemonium presaged the coming of the storm in all its fury. What had preceded was but a preliminary gust announcing the tornado. It broke with terrific violence from all points of the compass at once. Unable longer to restrain their hatred of their ancient enemies, who had kept them bottled up for sixteen hours in the damp and dark, the Moslems hurled themselves upon their Chinese brothers. The Moslem who dies in battle fighting for his creed goes straight to the Moslem paradise.

The vast system of caverns became a black hell of milling humanity churning itself by sheer, brute weight to pulp. The enemies were too intimately engaged for firearms to count. The Chinese soldiers dropped their rifles or had them ripped from their hands. In the half light of the vast entrance hall, where men could distinguish ally from enemy, the killing at first proceeded with some discrimination. In the other caverns each gouged whatever came to his hand. The floors of black caves that no foot had trod for a generation grew slippery under the incessant patter of innumerable feet, and the steady splash of sullen water drowned the cries of faithful and infidel alike as they plunged by hundreds into the unseen subterranean rivers.

Through it all the marines stood with their backs to the eastern wall of the entrance, not firing a shot. It was not their fight. To attack would be wanton suicide. A concerted rush from that infuriated mob would sweep them like chaff into one of the black caverns behind them, or crush them to death against the rock walls between the black holes. Retreat to the crescent exit was impossible. The Chinese soldiers had blocked that possibility at the start.

Gradually the mere numbers of the Chinese soldiers in the audience hall began to count. The indiscriminate trampling set in a definite direction like a football scrimmage gaining—or losing—headway. The whole mass moved slowly away from the entrance toward the main caverns. As the soldiers gained ground those on the outskirts of the mob picked up rifles from the floor and took up their position in the rear. They knew what was coming. Shots zipped at random over the heads of the mass. These had the intended effect. Unarmed and exhausted, the Moslems broke, became a rabble, and fled yelling into the darkest caverns.

The audience hall now belonged to the Chinese soldiers and the marines in the ratio of about four to one. The disparity would have been much greater had not the main body of the soldiers been busy elsewhere. The insane fight still raged with unabated fury in the pitch darkness of the labyrinth. Under the orders of their officers the Chinese in the audience hall retired to a line about a hundred yards from the eastern wall. One hundred yards happened to be precisely that range at which they habitually made their best score in target practice. Their officers, of course, did not withdraw to the new line by mere chance.

"Steady," said the lieutenant. He felt that the marines' turn was next.

It was. As the red tongues leapt from the rifles of the Chinese the marines dropped as if shot to the floor. A spatter of bullets rained upon them from the wall behind. The rest whined harmlessly into the black holes.

"Rush them when I say, Go." The lieutenant gave the order as coolly as if they were enjoying a Fourth of July sham battle in a city stadium. "Are you ready?"

Before he could say "go" a volley from the entrance crashed into the cave. Against the brilliant sunlight of the crescent, Lane's twenty men looked like a regiment to the imaginative Chinese. They retreated another hundred yards. Then they stood their ground. Safety, in the shape of numerous black caverns within a minute's fast run behind them, gave them courage. They also were curious to learn the exact strength of the enemy. To their surprise they saw two figures detach themselves from the thin line across the entrance and walk boldly into the cave.

"Where's the missionary?" Lane shouted.

"Here, sir. Behind us."

"Send a man forward with him."

When the madman was brought up, Lane studied his face critically.

"I suppose you are rather upset by all the shooting, but pull yourself together. Who is this man?" he asked, indicating the governor.

"Pontius Pilate," the missionary replied promptly.

"Snap out of it! This is the governor of Kansu. Tell him this for me. He is to order all of the Chinese over there to come forward, ten at a time, and surrender their arms. If he does not, I will shoot him, myself. Translate!"

To emphasize the threat Lane held his revolver pressed against the governor's back while the latter shouted the order for disarmament at his men. The Chinese hesitated.

"What did the governor say?" Lane demanded of the missionary.

Before the missionary could reply the high, piping voice of a Chinese officer was heard expostulating vociferously.

"Catch everything that man says," Lane ordered. "It may cost all of us our lives if you don't."

The officer was objecting to the governor's order. Why should the Chinese lay down their arms? Just give them half a chance and they would clear the cave of every American in it in two minutes. The governor began to sweat. If his men mutinied now he was one dead Chinaman.

"Tell the governor," Lane ordered, "to explain to his men how strong our main army in Shen-si is. Tell him not to forget the five hundred bombing planes."

On this wholesome advice the governor became quite eloquent. His speech evidently impressed the soldiers. The first ten marched forward, deposited their arms at the governor's feet and retired. Soon a huge stack of rifles and another of cartridge belts and bayonets rose like hastily improvised earthworks before Lane and the governor. In half an hour the Chinese in the audience chamber were disarmed. Such is the creative power of a vivid imagination working on credulity. True fighters would have seen the marines in Hades before complying with such an order.

The Chinese were to enjoy a stronger taste of discipline. At an order from Lane the marines rounded up the mob and set them at fatigue duty. First the magazines of the rifles were emptied of their shells. Then, through the governor, fifty of the vanquished were ordered to carry all of the shells and cartridge belts, under an escort of marines, into the place of massacre and pitch the lot into the black well. This done, the rifles followed. The Chinese were then ordered to police the labyrinth and round up all the followers of the governor. At his command all were to come at once to the audience chamber and bring not only their own arms but also any they might stumble over in the dark.

This, of course, was a long job, and doubtless many stragglers, firearms and all, remained in the less accessible caverns. Nevertheless, the disarmament must have been at least ninety per cent efficient. It was to be still more thorough. Lane ordered the governor to explain to twenty of his superior officers exactly why the Chinese troops were being disarmed. He added that

they were under no compulsion to obey orders but if they refused, the American army would annihilate them on the following day and, on the day after that, destroy every building in Kansu by a systematic bombing from the air. If on the other hand, they chose the part of common sense and obeyed, and if, further, they gave sufficient guarantees that they would leave the Moslems in peace, the United States Army would withdraw at once without a single reprisal for the slaughtered missionaries.

It worked beautifully. The last act in the mopping up took over two hours, but it paid. Under a guard of marines the governor and the twenty officers he had instructed were hustled back to Teng-shan. There, as fast as possible, they despatched small contingents of the soldiers still camped about the palace, with all the military supplies they could stagger under, to the caves. Unopened boxes of ammunition, machine guns and hundreds of new rifles were pitched into the well.

By four o'clock in the afternoon the disarmament was practically completed. The governor stood near the entrance, inside the cave, watching the last contingent of Chinese toiling up the slope. These men brought nothing but half a dozen machine guns and forty or fifty wooden boxes of ammunition for the guns. Lane and his first lieutenant stood beside the governor. They were tired, Lane particularly. The job was about finished and it was well done. For sheer lack of ammunition and arms the anti-Moslem Chinese would be unable for at least a year to trouble their turbulent brothers.

Lane and the lieutenant were laughing and joking over the ease with which they had worked the bluff. Bit by bit—for the captain was a modest man—the lieutenant pried out of him the whole story of his bullying of the governor and the effective myth of a huge American army with five hundred bombing planes just beyond the pass into Shen-si. At the moment the rest of the Americans were far back, supervising the Chinese in the audience hall and in the gallery leading to the pit.

"Your imaginary army," the lieutenant laughed, "has done

a quicker clean up than the whole U. S. A. and U. S. N. combined could have done. And we have only lost twelve men, including Mr. Saxby." These all occurred in the first rush, when the Chinese swept the guards off their feet.

"You will lose them all in the next hour," a thin, dry voice remarked directly over their heads.

They spun around and saw nothing but a smooth, enigmatic wall of limestone. Instantly the same voice harshened and lapsed into Chinese.

"Markoff!" Lane shouted, making a grab for the governor. But the governor had heard the first Chinese sentence in the air, and it was enough.

"The Americans were lying about the army and their bombing planes in Shen-si," said that airy Chinese voice.

Before the captain could stop him the governor was racing down the slope, yelling orders at his men with the machine guns. It was too late to shoot him. The machine gunners were already bursting the ammunition boxes with the heaviest stones they could lift.

"Shall I shoot?" the lieutenant yelled.

"No!" Lane shouted back as he ripped off his tunic. "If he's killed it means war with China. Get the men out before the Chinks start firing!"

The Chinese were already feeding the first strings of cartridges into the machine guns. Lane leaped back to the entrance and, with frantic haste, signalled with his tunic a short, desperate order to the pilot in the bombing plane. Were the two in the plane watching the entrance to the cave as he had ordered? And if they were, would they be able to take his message? The first machine gun rattled into action. Before the bullets sprayed the rock ten feet to the left of where he stood, Lane saw the smoke shoot from the exhaust of the plane as the huge insect sprang forward for the takeoff. Lane leaped back into the cave, out of reach of the machine guns, just as all six began spitting as one. He had played his last card. It looked like the joker.

9

MARKOFF'S THEFT

UNDER THE CZARS, MARKOFF MOST LIKELY would have been a chief of secret police. He was that type—cold, cowardly, and sensually cruel. Under the Moscow communists he found his true trade. As a confidential agent to China he had opportunities for betrayals and wholesale murder on a scale denied him in Moscow. The natural genius of the Chinese for inhuman forms of punishment incited him to jealous competition. They, after all, were but amateurs; he rather conceitedly classed himself as the expert professional. If such men as the infamous Letchine and certain of the bloodier czars, generals and prelates of old Russia were not commonplace, amply documented historical personages, Markoff could be dismissed as an impossibility. The historian of a thousand years hence will look back on these men and, with a superior smile, deny that they ever existed. Their common disorder seems to have been a queer type of perversion, which after all is not so rare, even outside of Holy Russia. In the prolonged infliction of pain they experienced a voluptuous pleasure. If unable to enjoy both, they preferred massacre to love in any of its more usual forms, and one and all they were physical cowards of the lowest type. Incessant brooding upon

what might happen to their own hides, and imaginative exaggerations of every trivial pain, drove them over the verge of insanity and lashed them to more violent excesses. Mad dogs are shot on sight; the Markoffs and the rest achieve eminence in statecraft of a sort.

While the Chinese were engaged in sweeping one another into the subterranean rivers, Markoff was in the singularly happy position of having everything he wanted. He had enjoyed one massacre and hoped shortly to witness another, and his love was within easy reach. He might take what he had coveted for months any time the girl came out of her silly faint.

White Lily, as a matter of fact, had not fainted. She was not that kind. The brain in her was better than Markoff's vapor of brutish instincts, and she knew how to use it. So long as she lay on the limestone floor like a dead rabbit, and as uninteresting, she knew she was safe. Her captor would not pester her till she came to life. In the meantime he was getting a great deal of pleasure out of old Saxby. Should Saxby's impotent rage pall on the insatiable Markoff, White Lily might try a trick or two which Hu the Good had taught her. She could take care of herself—for a while, anyhow. Markoff and Saxby conversed in English, so White Lily missed the gist of their remarks. Nevertheless she guessed that the old American, who somehow reminded her of her grandfather, was in a great fright.

Saxby was indeed scared half out of his wits. You may succeed in temporizing with the executioner, or you may be able to argue the inquisitor out of giving the rack an extra twist, but you cannot reason with an ignorant fool. There is but one way to reach a brain like Markoff's, and that is with a bullet. Saxby had only his eloquence. It made not the slightest impression on the void of Markoff's intelligence.

The cave where Markoff "questioned" his prisoner was one of the two which the earliest Moslems had enlarged on either side of the crescent entrance. Originally these caves were mere pockets in the limestone wall of the entrance, reached by tor-

tuous, narrow burrows from the audience hall. When the persecuted followers of the Prophet first began using the caves as a refuge in time of massacre, they cut a peephole in the wall of each pocket so that the invisible sentry might spy on all who sought to enter the caverns. The peepholes could be closed by little slabs of limestone which fitted perfectly. Later the pockets were enlarged to spacious, airy guard rooms and liberally provided with food, torches, water and sleeping accommodations. At the same time the astute Moslems blocked the ancient waterways which were the original means of communication with the hall, and scooped out of the soft limestone an elaborate maze of narrow tunnels connecting the guard rooms with the audience chamber. The guards, of course, never lost themselves in these mazes; it was hoped that enemies might, or at least be heard by the guards in time to be knocked on the head.

As political and spiritual advisors to Hu the Good, Markoff and Liapanouff soon learned the shortest way to each of the guard rooms. In fact the two agents believed they knew all about the caves long before they ordered the jehad. Hu told them much; personal explorations told them more. They knew of one secret exit in case of extreme danger. Hu either forgot to mention the other to them, or kept it to himself as an old man's secret to be shared with no one but his pet. Neither Liapanouff nor Markoff was told of the secret way by which White Lily left the cave when Hu told her to go and seek out the governor of Shen-si. The snakelike Markoff might easily have crawled through it; the puffy Liapanouff was too gross. The other secret exit could readily have extruded Liapanouff, had not Hu the Good shown him a broader and quicker way out.

Either of the guard rooms by the crescent entrance offered Markoff the ideal cubbyhole from which to direct operations while the marines occupied the audience chamber. The instant the marines rushed the caves when the bombing plane routed the tail end of Chinese army, Markoff, already half way down the audience chamber, hastily collected a bodyguard of three

superior Chinese officers and bolted with them for an inconspicuous black hole in the north wall of the chamber. Presently he and his panting escort found themselves in the comfortable guard room at the north side of the entrance. The peephole gave them a view of the entrance, of the long, rocky slope leading up to it from Teng-shan, and of at least a part of the interior of the audience chamber. Markoff followed with interest practically everything the marines did. He witnessed the arrest of old Saxby by Lane and speculated on its significance. Were the damned capitalists divided among themselves? Before he had solved this thorny puzzle to the satisfaction of his reptilian instincts, Markoff saw White Lily arrive breathless and with bleeding feet and, a few minutes later, he observed Saxby and the captain consulting over the girl, apparently on the best of terms. At this point of his observations Markoff moistened his thin lips with his bright red tongue. He determined to possess White Lily, then and there.

Markoff's desire begot the Chinese attack that came within an ace of sweeping all the marines off their feet. At his orders the three Chinese officers departed to round up enough of their men to launch an effective offensive. The flying wedge was Markoff's conception. White Lily was to be brought to him alive. The American in civilian clothes also was to be captured, if possible. His person in any event was to be bound and carried as intact as feasible to the guard room for Markoff's inspection. Markoff's theory was that the old civilian who had come by airplane must be a figure of some weight in the councils of capitalism. Probably his clothes were rich in documents which would expose the United States as the secret enemy, not only of liberty at large the world over, but of communism in particular. And not unlikely there would be found on this person detailed plans for the invasion of Mongolia, Russia and China. The lieutenant in command of the marines was ignored. Eventually he was to be slaughtered with the rest, of course, but he probably was of no importance. Markoff had seen Lane leave the caves and, in

a general way, he had guessed the captain's mission. Being a one hundred per cent coward himself, Markoff could not conceive of another man taking his life in his hands for a forlorn hope. Therefore, Markoff reasoned, the American forces in China must be strong and not far from Teng-shan. He would wait until the captain's return to decide upon his further strategy. In the meantime he could pass the hours profitably with the imagined ambassador and pleasantly with White Lily.

The flying wedge of Chinese under picked officers did its work well. White Lily, unfortunately in a dead faint, and the capitalist ambassador were delivered whole at his feet. Having borrowed a bayonet from a Chinese officer, Markoff dismissed all of his faithful followers, closed the peephole and proceeded to business.

White Lily gave no trouble. Her "faint" was so deep that she scarcely seemed to breathe. She knew how to play "possum" better than the animal itself. Saxby was a tougher problem. He must be made to talk without being given a chance to make himself heard by the sentries who might march past the closed peephole. When Saxby was flung down by the guards he let out a roar that might have been heard in Teng-shan, had not the Chinese in the audience hall been raising such a prodigious racket at the moment.

Markoff easily solved the problem. He ripped off half of Saxby's shirt and stuffed most of it into the captive's mouth. Old Saxby, of course, did not open his mouth wide at Markoff's invitation to accept the gag. The agent was compelled to force the prisoner's mouth open with the bayonet. Then, to teach his captive the folly of future resistance, he heated the tip of the bayonet red hot in the flame of a torch and proceeded to use it. Saxby was so tightly bound that his struggles quickly exhausted him. When Markoff got through with his discipline, Saxby could not have shouted if he had tried. Before removing the gag Markoff cautioned the prisoner that if he raised his voice above a whisper, the bayonet, then resting with its point

on Saxby's throat, would instantly cut off his remarks before he could finish them.

Markoff's first question concerned the fighting strength of the "American force" which Lane, in his parley on the slope, had told him was on the march in Shen-si. Saxby's whispered denial that he knew anything about it earned him a short repetition of the third degree. Seeing that his prisoner might lose his mind if pressed too far, Markoff, like the experienced inquisitor he was, desisted. Saxby by this time was pretty much of a wreck. The things that one civilized human being will think of to do to another would pass the belief of almost any undomesticated beast. The beasts kill their prey or their enemies and let it go at that. Markoff, heir to a more cultivated taste, enjoyed himself. Nevertheless, he got precisely nothing out of old Saxby that might give him the slightest clue to the real strength of the Americans. Therefore, he must wait until the captain returned, when the subsequent proceedings would probably enlighten him.

Having exhausted his ingenuity to make the prisoner talk, Markoff turned to the easier problem of picking his victim's pockets. Saxby was now but half conscious. His condition was quite genuine, not feigned as was White Lily's. Markoff therefore thieved without a protest from the thievee. Like a gorged condor he flopped down on the limestone floor beside his prey and fished for tidbits.

Markoff was not avaricious. The gold watch did not even tempt him. Greed for material goods is not one of the communist vices. The loose change he also cast aside. A sheaf of receipted club bills and a steamer ticket first claimed his attention. The incriminating letter head "Army and Navy Club, Shanghai," told the excited agent a great deal that was not so. The date of the steamer ticket also filled him to the gullet with fat, plausible lies. Finally, a typewritten circular letter announcing the date of the next meeting of the National Scientific Council in Washington, D. C., with Saxby's name typed in the

proper place, completed the evidence. Saxby stood, or rather lay, convicted of being an important personal agent of the President of the United States. He had been sent to Shanghai with secret orders to the capitalist generals at the Army and Navy Club, Shanghai, and possibly also to the large army of the international bankers in Shen-si. Such was the astute agent's reasonable but somewhat puerile deduction.

Here Markoff began to sweat. If the American forces from Shen-si arrived in Kansu before he escaped from the caves, he would be court-martialed and shot for having "questioned" Saxby. If, on the other hand, he destroyed the evidence against himself, he would be accused of having murdered the American. Then he would be shot, probably without a courtmartial.

Suddenly he saw a happy way out. The moment the marines left the caves—they would probably evacuate when their main force came up—he would induce the Chinese officers to take the roped prisoner and send him to join Hu. The officers, disliking the capitalist Americans as much as he, would gladly do their part and enjoy the joke. While they were laughing at their pleasantry, Markoff himself could slip out of the cave by the secret exit known to him, and leave the Chinese to settle for his little joke. Once safely on the mountainside, miles from Teng-shan, he felt he could easily escape and make his way back to Moscow to report. What a report that would be. Flushed with proud anticipations of his chief's praise, Markoff resumed his systematic thievery with zest.

Rolling the still unconscious victim over on his side, Markoff brought the unexplored coat pocket into view. With a sibilant exclamation like a snake's hiss, he pounced upon the bulging pocket and clawed out a fat, untidy notebook blotched all over with virulent looking green stains. The evil color had soaked into the pages in half circles and long, fingering streaks, as if someone had spilled a full bottle of green ink on the half-opened book. Nearly every page had its green blob; some were completely dyed.

As he fluttered the leaves of Yang's notebook, pausing at every other page in a hopeless endeavor to understand the apparently meaningless jumbles of numerals and chemical equations, Markoff almost regretted that he was an ignorant enthusiast with but a vestigial brain. But he actually was incapable of such regret. He lacked the necessary nerve connections to beget such an emotion. He merely fluttered the leaves like an illiterate idiot. All these letters and figures must mean something, the more so as they had come out of the prisoner's pocket. But what? That was the painful question. Markoff almost laughed as the ready means of solving his puzzle presented itself. Seizing a dish of water he dashed the contents into the prisoner's face.

Saxby did not come out of his stupor at once. When at last he groaned and opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Yang's notebook in Markoff's right hand. Instantly he forgot his pain in alarm at what the ignorant vulture before him might do with that green curse.

"Put that back in my pocket!" he shouted.

Markoff reminded him that he must not raise his voice. Saxby continued in a lower voice.

"You utter fool! Put it back where you got it, I say! You don't know what you are doing! Put it back!"

Markoff, convinced now that he had captured the enemy's most important military document, ignored the insult.

"This is important?" he taunted, fluttering the pages in Saxby's face.

The barrage of curses and abuse which he drew in reply but strengthened his superstition. He became crafty and coldly cruel. With a smile he picked up the bayonet.

"You read this for me."

He indicated a green page of chemical formulas and simple mathematical calculations. To his surprise Saxby capitulated at once. The string of names which the prisoner reeled off, of course, made no impression on Markoff's vacuum.

"You are lying," he said.

"I read you exactly what is written there. Don't you recognize a few elementary chemical names when you hear them? They can't be so very different in your own language."

"Chemistry?" Markoff snapped like a rattlesnake. He knew about explosives and poison gases, and he knew also that chemistry was at the bottom of them. That much he had gathered from the military experts during the endless round-table discussions at headquarters in Moscow. "These are military documents?"

"No. Purely scientific. No military value whatever."

"You must think I am a child," Markoff sneered. "If I cannot see the military value of this I know men in Moscow who can. As soon as your men leave this cave I am going out by another way. And I shall go straight back to Moscow. With this."

"You damned fool! You'll never get half way. That book is more dangerous than all the explosives and poison gases of all the armies of the world. Put it back in my pocket before you drop it. Look out—!"

Saxby's frenzied shout was brought out by Markoff's blundering with the book. Trying to handle the bayonet and turn the pages at the same time he had almost dropped the green abomination on the floor.

"Be quiet!" he snarled, as he slipped the book into his pocket.

Saxby closed his eyes and groaned.

"You unutterable fool. You will never know what you have done. If I told you it would do no good. You have no mind. But for your own sake, if not for the sake of the world, take that thing a thousand miles out to sea and drop it overboard if you *must* steal it. Never put it down anywhere. Leave it in your pocket. Don't touch anything with your hands after handling that book. Treat it like the plague—"

"A new poison?" the dull-witted agent queried. He was too stupid to keep his hand out the pocket into which he had

stuffed the book.

"Oh, what's the use?" Saxby groaned. "What good is it to tell you that it is probably more dangerous than a thousand Asiatic plagues? You are rotten with it already."

Markoff smiled a silly, cruel smile.

"And after I return from Moscow," he scoffed, "the United States of America will be rotten with it, too. One of the generals was talking of something like this a year ago. Diseases; they shall be our new weapons. You capitalists were coming over here, through China, to try them on us. Now I understand you. I see why the Army and Navy Club in Shanghai sent you in an airplane. You need no soldiers to invade our country. One page of this book in a lake or river that waters our people, and you have conquered them."

Markoff became almost lyrical over the imagined possibilities. In spite of himself he began to prophesy and to take a lascivious pleasure in the slaughters he predicted. Here was something that spoke directly to his cruelty, and it found him eloquent.

"But the capitalists," he concluded, "not we, shall die by millions."

"I grant you the first," Saxby flung at him. "As to the second, I doubt it. You yourself may be the first to go."

"I think not," Markoff smiled. "You shall precede me, but by another way. As I told you, I am going to Moscow. But, before I leave, you will join Hu the Good."

With brutal brevity he described to Saxby the end of Hu the Good as he had witnessed it in his futile attempt to save Liapanouff.

"You will join him," he repeated.

For some moments Saxby made no reply. His burns and the weals from the cutting ropes were about as much as any sane man could endure and keep his sanity. His excitement over, pain gained the upper hand and took a grip on his usually clear mind. His reply was not that which he would have made

in his senses. Nevertheless, it may be recorded for what it may be worth.

"After seeing you," he said, "and after thinking in cold blood of what has happened in these caves, I believe it will be better for the world if nature does take the other course. You, after all, may be the greatest benefactor the human race has ever known."

"I know it," Markoff agreed, visualizing in his sublime ignorance a conquest of the world by red disease in the hands of his present friends, and later, in the happy future, their own extinction by civil strife of a similar kind. "And do not forget," he reminded Saxby, who showed signs of relapsing into unconsciousness again, "that you follow Hu."

White Lily stirred, all but imperceptibly. She had heard her grandfather's name mentioned several times by Markoff, and she could no longer control herself. Her muscles betrayed her. The slight movement did not escape Markoff's keen, reptilian eye. Instantly he was at her side, bending over her, gabbling in Chinese. The one word that she had understood so far was her grandfather's name. Now she could no longer feign unconsciousness. She knew that Markoff was aware of her deception. And less bearable than the thought of what probably would happen to herself was the agony to learn what had happened to her grandfather. Springing to her feet she confronted her tormentor.

"What have you done with him?" she cried.

Saxby swore, cursing himself for his inability to understand Chinese. The girl's distress spoke a universal tongue which any man could comprehend, and here he lay, powerless and dumb to shout her even a word of warning. For all he knew she might be swearing away her soul to the evil beast leering into her face.

Markoff found himself on the horns of a ticklish dilemma. To tell the truth might kill her on the spot and rob him of his lust. To refrain from torturing her would let slip an exquisite

pleasure that could be had for the taking. A trick of memory cast the decision. He remembered her threat when he and Liapanouff had told her that the jehad was to be bloodless. As he remembered vividly the icy fear which had shot up his spine at the vagueness of that threat. So she was Hu's right hand, was she, to reward him for his share in the jehad? He jeered in her face. He would tell her where Hu's body was, and exactly how it got there. It would be the most tingling cruelty of his career.

She heard it to the end without a movement and without expression on her face. If any shred of her heart was still unbroken it broke then.

"I would have paid," she said, and turned blindly to make her way back to the audience chamber.

Markoff's talon of a hand detained her.

"Not yet," he murmured ingratiatingly. "You are too beautiful in your sorrow." He remembered the remark from a Russian drama.

Although he understood none of the words, Saxby read Markoff's intentions easily enough. To distract the fiend's attention, he began shouting. Instantly Markoff was upon him. But he had not relinquished his grip on White Lily's arm. The listless girl, already dead in spirit, was dragged after her possessor. With his free hand Markoff stuffed the gag back into Saxby's mouth. Now he was free to do what he pleased. Before doing it, however, he decided to take a look through the peephole to see how things were going with the Americans.

He removed the small slab of limestone just in time to see the Chinese, in the cleared cave, line up for their hundred yard shot at the marines. This was too good to be missed. Keeping a firm grip on his prey he abandoned himself to ecstasy. When the marines dropped to the floor at the volley he mistakenly imagined they had been shot to a man. His disappointment at seeing them rise to a crouching position lasted but a moment. He guessed that they would rush the enemy. Then there would

be sport worth seeing. He licked his lips, and all but bit his tongue in two when Lane's men stepped into his field of vision and delivered their salvo that saved the minute—if not the day—for their side.

Fascinated between alternate hope for a sudden massacre and fear that the American army had arrived and was deployed on the mountainside beyond his field of vision, he stood for hours watching every incomprehensible detail of the disarmament. When White Lily struggled to get free he put a hand over her mouth and whispered that if she did not keep quiet he would kill her—horribly. He knew how.

As the day wore on and the machine guns began to follow the rifles into the pit he became almost insane with fear. The Americans must have captured the whole province. They would shoot him—or would they hang him? He couldn't live to go through that. Rather than stake his lean neck against the one chance in millions of escape he would be his own executioner. His free hand stole to his vest pocket and his numbed fingers fumbled for the slippery capsule. Then, like voices in a dream, he heard two men talking directly below him on the other side of the limestone wall. Their every word floated up to the peephole. They might have been addressing their remarks to him. Knowing that he was saved he bided his time, waiting for the strategic moment. The fewer armed Chinese abroad after the grand finale the safer his own skin. He waited till the last possible moment. Then he spoke.

Leaving the peephole he sat down by Saxby to rest. He would defer pleasure till all business was out of the way. The Chinese were already attending to that.

10

PAID

MARKOFF SAT AND WAITED, SMILING AT THE rattle of machine guns and the crack of rifles which penetrated the thin limestone partition between the entrance and the guard room. He dared not enjoy himself at the peephole for fear of getting a wild bullet in the eye. In fact he began to perspire freely at the thought of some energetic slug piercing the barrier of his ambush. He of course knew nothing of Lane's signal to the bombing plane. It had not even occurred to him that the plane might carry bombs. In his superstitious questioning of Saxby, he had overlooked the only practical details.

In signaling his order to the pilot Lane knew exactly what he was doing and how desperate was the chance he took. Intuition told him that where Markoff was there also would be found Saxby and White Lily. It was to be a case of kill or cure. There was no alternative.

Remembering the captain's instructions the pilot made all the noise mechanically possible. With a deafening racket he soared up the slope, flying at about twenty feet from the ground, and shot roaring directly toward the knot of machine gunners. They were on the shortest line to his objective anyway, so he took them in. Screaming with terror the Chinese gunners bolted. One died on the spot from an overworked heart. The plane shot on; the gunners were not its meat.

The terrific roar of the plane's approach became plainly audible in the guard room. Recognizing that muffled drone as the angry voice of her dream on the mountainside, White Lily, in a burst of superhuman strength, wrenched herself from Markoff's grasp and fled down the black tunnel toward the audience chamber. The instinct for self-preservation snatched her away; her lacerated feet were insensible to pain. Stunned by the rapidly increasing roar, Markoff got to his hands and knees. Slavering with fear like a mad dog he started to crawl toward the tunnel. His elbows turned to water and he collapsed like a snake with a broken back. He dreaded nothing definite, yet he believed that his end was upon him. Saxby feared nothing at all, for he had not the slightest anticipation of what was about to happen.

It happened all at once. A thundering impact on the roof directly over Markoff's head was swallowed instantly in the overwhelming rumble of an avalanche of shattered stone. Half a mountainside, jarred from its equilibrium by the simultaneous explosion of four huge T.N.T. bombs, roared down the slope, burying the crescent entrance and leaving the guard rooms open to the evening sky. Tons of splintered rock crashed to the floor and flying fragments whizzed past the heads of the two men. They escaped with only a few cuts and bruises.

Like many a costly shell explosion in the trenches the net profit was an overpowering racket that quickly died and the utter destruction of a work that had taken years, or centuries, or ages to perfect. The ruin of the crescent entrance was total; that of the guard rooms, now gaping like a couple of hollow teeth at the arch of the sky, followed as a mere corollary. Markoff lay paralyzed with fear, unable to move a muscle, gibbering like an idiot. Saxby, bound and powerless, held his tongue and wondered in his daze what it was all about.

By a natural enough combination of blunders, the shot achieved at least half a success. Lane's signal to the pilot read "Drop bombs north of entrance"—meaning to drop the bombs

one at a time on the slope directly over the mouth of the entrance. But, exposed as he was to the fire of the Chinese machine gunners, Lane had no time to signal more explicit orders. He intended that the pilot should drop one bomb as directed and, if lucky, shatter only the outer wall and part of the roof of the cave in which Markoff was hiding. Then, if luck still favored him, and the first bomb merely opened the cave without blowing it to bits, the pilot was to observe his hit. Lane gave him credit for that much foresight before releasing the second bomb. If the pilot saw his late passenger, Saxby, in the cave, he of course would not drop the second bomb. Saxby, according to Lane's lightning-calculated theory was to scramble out of the opened cave and be picked up somewhere by the pilot.

Unfortunately the pilot was a well-trained young man from the Navy, accustomed by tough years of rigid discipline to obeying orders on the jump and to the letter. When Lane signaled for bombs the pilot naturally assumed that he meant *bombs,* not *a* bomb. Hence he dumped the lot all at once. No one was to blame; Lane had no time to explain, the pilot no license to argue an order. The men in the plane assumed that Lane had heard of a safe back door to the caves and was signaling for them to block the front against the Chinese and their murderous machine guns. They hopped to their supposed job with a will and executed it to the President's taste.

It was thorough. The whole Chinese army would need two weeks to clear away the rubbish and force an entrance. Long before the Chinese could enter, the marines would have given their enemies in the cave the slip and be well on their way back to Shanghai. Such was the not unreasonable theory of the pilot. What Lane anticipated in case the first bomb exploded in the guard room, or merely stove in the roof, need not be dwelt upon here. He believed that Saxby would prefer such a fate to being left alive and sensitive to the mercy of Markoff.

As the plane roared back to pursue the Chinese into Tengshan before resting to await further orders, Saxby came out of

his daze. From where he lay he could see Markoff still helpless with fear. In the evening light the interior of the shattered guard room shone with a blinding brilliance after the comparative murk of the torchlight. The black entrance to the tunnel leading to the audience chamber gaped unblocked. If only he could get free of the ropes cutting his very bones he might escape before Markoff recovered control of his muscles.

Like a torpid snake thawing out on a rock in the April sunshine, Markoff began to writhe. His bony skull rolled over horribly and his glassy eyes fixed upon the bayonet. To his crazy vacuum it was now proved conclusively that the five hundred bombing planes in Shen-si were not a capitalistic myth. He had questioned, not to say tortured and robbed, the high ambassador of the United States. Therefore, if the victim escaped, he, the inquisitor, would hang. There was yet time to dispose of the evidence. He need not kill the prisoner in the guard room; he could drag him into one of the black passages and do the job there. Then he could swear to the American officers that he had seen Saxby, crazed by fear, running from the Chinese directly into one of the corridors leading to the subterranean rivers. If only he could summon the strength to his watery muscles he might yet save his neck. But his strength ebbed as he crawled.

His fingers at last touched the handle of the bayonet. The cold contact of the murderous steel was like an electric shock to his flabby flesh. An icy current of determination flowed into his cold soul and the old lust for cruelty filled him with a new strength. He felt that he would not hang.

Suddenly, like a snake about to strike, he raised his bony skull and stared with maniac eyes at the wall behind him. He had heard hesitant feet feeling their way down the darkness of the tunnel. Relinquishing his grasp upon the bayonet he involuntarily clutched at his throat. Crazed beyond all memory or reason by his fear he forgot the capsule in his pocket that might save the hangman his trouble. His one instinct was the hunted animal's to seek safety in concealment. A superhuman terror put

strength into his muscles and he dragged himself behind a huge fragment of the shattered roof.

Saxby recognized those foosteps, although they halted, lame with pain. A white face appeared in the darkness of the tunnel and ceased to advance. He nodded his head vigorously. Swiftly, and as noiselessly as she could, White Lily slipped into the shattered guard room and looked fearfully about her. Behind his rock Markoff was invisible. Saxby's eyes, fixed upon the bayonet, and his compressed lips were more eloquent than speech. As quietly as possible she picked up the bayonet and cut the cords. Saxby was free, but he could not move. Seeing his plight, she laid the bayonet on the floor, grasped the helpless man under the arms, and began dragging him toward the tunnel.

The noise of Saxby's body being dragged over the loose fragments acted like a douche of cold water on Markoff's cowardice. Peering round the corner of his rock he saw in a glance what was happening. Its implications for him, if successful, were obvious. And it had just struck him for the first time that White Lily could tell the American interpreter all the details of the "questioning" in the guard room. Automatically he was on his feet. His star was still high; this girl's stupid humanity had delivered her into his hand. With her and the American "ambassador" eliminated he could defy any court-martial in China. He tottered toward the bayonet.

Saxby saw his intention. Unable to stand, much less to walk or fight, he could only raise his arm and point to the bayonet. White Lily saw. In a flash she had snatched the steel. By a strange coincidence she flung at Markoff almost the identical words which Hu had addressed to Liapanouff.

"You are neither a man nor a beast. If I kill you it is not a killing."

She sprang after him like a tigress. With a strangled cry Markoff blundered into the tunnel. She followed him in a flash, as silent as a stroke of lightning. The horror of an imminent

death by sharp steel, now infinitely greater than the fear of being hanged, but wings to Markoff's feet as he fled through the pitch black labyrinth.

Instinct saved him. Hearing his pursuer pass the end of his corridor he stopped dead. She raced on. Presently he heard her stop. She had lost him.

She did not search long. It may have been solicitude for the old American who reminded her of Hu, or it may have been the memory of her grandfather's command that the killing cease, that quelled her fury. It quickly died. Cold and shaken, she hurried back to the guard room.

Saxby was recovering. As the blood began to circulate through his stiffened muscles he put forth all his strength and will-power. He walked, although the effort cost him excruciating torture. When White Lily entered, he glanced involuntarily at her hands. She still grasped the bayonet. It was clean.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "I would rather have had my throat cut than let you do that, no matter what he has done. Your kind isn't made every day. I wish I knew Chinese—or even your name."

He took the bayonet from her hand and hobbled after her. This time he made no mistake. They did not venture unarmed into the black maze. If they passed Markoff's hiding place on their way to the audience chamber he gave no sign. Even a stupid girl and a stupider capitalist, he imagined, would learn from one such lesson as he had given them. As for himself his only safety lay in keeping strictly out of sight until the Americans left.

On emerging into the audience chamber they found it deserted by the Chinese. One and all, forgetful for the moment of their bitter feuds, had sought safety in the farthest recesses of the caverns. The terrific concussion of the exploding bombs, and the immediately following thunder of the avalanche of stone, were to them the beginning of the end of all things. The big joss of the Christian converts after all was more than a myth,

and he had come, as prophesied, in wrath to judge the world and personally damn all unbelievers. Had not the gray-bearded missionary been too stunned by the concussion himself to grasp his unique opportunity, he might have followed the fleeing Chinese — Moslems, Confucians and miscellaneous infidels — into their distant caverns and converted them en masse. But he hovered like a gray ghost on the flank of the marines oblivious of time and of eternity. Of all that startled knot of men he was the one who kept his serenity. The poor fellow was too badly deranged to realize that his companions considered themselves broken beyond all possibility of patching. As they inspected the blocked exit by the dull flare of their smoky torches they said nothing. Words seemed superfluous.

Lane drew his first lieutenant aside.

"We seem to be bottled up. Unless there is another way out we may as well call it quits. It won't be long before the Chinese get over their scare and boil out on us. I am going to send you with a squad to explore for an escape."

"That Chinese girl probably knows of another exit if there is one," the lieutenant suggested.

"Yes, but where is she?"

"Probably where Saxby is. I shall try to find a way into that cave by the entrance first."

"Small chance. Saxby, Markoff and the girl are probably buried under a ton of rocks. Well, it was my only chance. I'd take it again under the same conditions. Saxby and the girl are probably better off dead. As for Markoff, I can't say."

Saxby spied the marines in the far distance by their moving torches. Just as the lieutenant was about to gather his men for the search, Saxby let out a shout.

"Captain Lane! Where's your interpreter? The Chinese girl is here."

Lane met them half way with the missionary.

"Never mind how we escaped," Saxby began. "That was a brilliant idea of yours—if it was yours—about bombing a way

out. Now, I don't want to be officious and seem to be giving orders. But we must get out of this cave at once."

"Check," Lane agreed grimly. "Know a way?"

"Ask the girl here. She's on our side. She just saved my life from that Russian agent. He's alive somewhere behind us."

Through the missionary, Lane put his question to White Lily. She told him at once of the two secret exits, one easily traveled by any man of only ordinary size, the other impossible to any but the slightest and most agile. There was but little danger of a check from any of the Chinese then hiding in the inner caverns, as the entrances to these secret tunnels were well hidden and not likely to be stumbled upon by accident. At Lane's request she guided the marines to the easier way out. He decided that it was time to retreat, and that without delay.

As the men lined up to pass one at a time into the well concealed, small black hole, White Lily held a torch high and estimated each candidate for escape. Presently she began pulling one man after another out of the line. Lane made a gesture of protest. Saxby, standing beside him, caught his arm.

"Let her alone. She knows what she is doing. Look at that last man she jerked out. He weighs two hundred at least. The slim fellows will make it, the others may not. She's not taking any chance of blocking the tunnel at the very beginning."

When the last and fattest marine had been passed in Lane turned to the missionary.

"You're next," he said. "You refused to take your proper turn. Now you get what's left. In with you."

A fanatical gleam flickered over the madman's eyes.

"I denied my master twice. Shall I deny him thrice?"

"You can do as you please about that," Lane seized the man by the collar of his coat and the seat of his trousers. "I may need you to talk for us. After that you are your own boss. Saxby, you're next."

Saxby obeyed without comment. He might have gone earlier as far as bulk was concerned. Lane granted him his request to

be one of the last as Saxby feared he might hold up the line. His burns and his general stiffness made each step a torture. There remained only White Lily. The captain motioned for her to precede him. She shook her head.

"Interpreter!" he shouted into the tunnel. "Saxby, send that missionary back."

Saxby himself had to back out in order to accommodate the interpreter.

"Tell her," Lane ordered, "that I shan't force her to come against her will, but that I think she will be safer with us than by herself. For all we know some of the enemy—or of her own people—may have found their way into the narrower tunnel."

The missionary reported that White Lily declined their protection.

"Then tell her to hurry as fast as she can to the other secret exit. I will detail a patrol to look out for her on the mountain as soon as I get out myself."

White Lily's translated reply was illuminating.

"I will stay here with my people and with those who hate them. Hu the Good said there must be no more killing. Unless these people are shown the way out they will starve and that is slow killing. Without me they would never find this way."

Lane saluted.

"Tell her," he said, "that I respect her wish, and regret that my duty to my men prevents me from staying to help."

"I'll stay," Saxby announced quietly. "My damned feet hurt so that I can only hobble, anyway. Lend me your revolver. Markoff is still abroad somewhere."

"But," Lane expostulated, "if any of the governor's soldiers catch sight of you they'll murder you. The girl is Chinese. She probably will know how to handle her own race much better than you or I would. If they turn on her she can bolt for the other secret tunnel and escape. I don't see what good you will be. However, I shall let you stay if the girl wants you. This is not a military matter, although technically I could order you

to come with us. Put it up to her."

Saxby insisted that the missionary emphasize to White Lily her possible danger from Markoff. With an armed man accompanying her on the search of the distant caverns she would be safe until her own people assembled in sufficient numbers to protect her. Saxby avoided transmitting his private dread that her own people, blaming her and Hu for their present plight, might turn against her.

To Saxby's offer White Lily replied with evident distress. She would have none of it. She would be quite safe. There was no danger in what she proposed, either from Markoff or from her own people. In their gratitude at escaping they would protect her, and she would be safe in the caverns, which she knew far better than Markoff did. Her last request to Saxby was personal.

"Go," she said, "with your friends. When I see you I see an image of my grandfather, and I would not have him here."

She was inexorable. With a sigh Saxby turned to precede Lane into the tunnel. White Lily had earned her right to do as she thought best; it was not for him or any other man to disregard her wishes.

"Ask her what her name is," Saxby directed.

The missionary gave the Chinese.

"What does it mean in English—if anything?" Saxby asked. "I might forget the Chinese."

"White Lily."

Assured that the friend who reminded her of Hu was safely on his way—provided he and the others in front of him could squeeze through the narrow places—White Lily kindled a fresh torch from the old and left the spot, as she thought, forever. The little that must be done before she might seek and find her heart's desire would not take long. Holding the torch like a beacon high above her head she walked rapidly from cave to vaster cave in search of her people. Only the quick patter of her footfalls broke the black silence and died in the vastness

without an echo. Indifferent to everything but the peace that before long would be hers, she felt no pain from her lacerated feet, and even the dull ache of her heart was swallowed up in a timeless void where there is neither joy nor sorrow.

She had never believed in the paradise of her grandfather; it was an old man's dream, a fable of his second childhood, to be tolerated but not mocked. The object of her secret contemplation was more serene than any paradise of the prophet's, and soon it would be hers as it was his even now. That he had grasped the only good thing in the very act of reaching for what he imagined was a better, was the kindest fate she could have wished him. The thing he thought he desired could never have satisfied him. Although he would never know it, he was happier than he had ever dreamed he should be. He had attained the supreme good blindly; she knew what she desired, and she would seek it with understanding.

Reaching the deepest cavern she stopped and sang her message into the darkness.

"The crescent entrance is choked with stones. You cannot pass out that way for many weeks. Send me ten of the men you trust and I will show them a secret way out of these caves. They shall be your guides. All, the people of Hu the Good and the soldiers of the governor of Kansu, must pass out in peace. There must be no more killing. This is the command of Hu the Good to his people. He took your guilt upon himself and paid with his life. Send me ten men or you starve. You see my torch, and I feel you in the dark places about this cave."

For perhaps a minute no sound answered. Then a shrill voice screamed through the darkness.

"Is this another trap? You and your grandfather betrayed us to the governor. Why should we believe you?"

"To save your own lives."

"We are safer here, and here we stay."

"As you will. I care no longer what you do, for I heard a voice on the mountain prophesying the end of all your strife.

I brought you the word of Hu the Good because I promised him that I would. Does it matter if you are as deaf as he is? Your hunger will not last long. Then you will forget and be forgotten. Does any man come with me?"

"No!"

The angry shout from a thousand throats hoarse with hatred reverberated through the vast cavern and died without an echo. They disowned her, and would have torn her to pieces had not their fear that she was a decoy sent by the governor held them in leash.

She retraced her steps to the audience chamber. There she kindled a fresh torch, picked up a bundle of the larger ones, and hurried into the void of a vaster cave on the further side of the hall. Having promised Hu that she would avert bloodshed if possible, she kept her word to him, although she believed that he would never know she had. Yet, although he had ceased to exist, she felt his presence in those dark caves. Not till she had carried the message of mercy to the deepest of them would the memory of him be appeased.

In some of the caves she heard the stealthy stirring of men all about her beyond the narrow circle of the torchlight, but none answered her summons. Either they disbelieved her like the men in the first cave, or they were too dull-witted to foresee their inevitable end. The plentiful stores of food in the dry caverns were more eloquent than the thin whisper of a distant hunger. If what she said was true they could dig a way out before they starved. The immediate risk of a second betrayal paralyzed their imaginations and they reasoned with their bellies. In two of the smaller caves the response was similar to that in the first, but angrier.

At length, shortly after midnight, her fruitless labor came to an end. She was free now to do what she longed to do. In her joy at the serene knowledge of freedom from all obligations to the dead or the living she quickened her weary steps back to the audience chamber. Physical exhaustion all but overcame

her, but her will conquered the desire to sink down on the smooth rock and sleep.

As she entered the audience chamber she broke into a run. The far eastern wall and the long corridor where ten thousand had trodden the way she was to take echoed to her coming. She heard the patter of her own feet multiplied in her ears, and it was music. Then, as from a world already forgotten in the headlong plunge to oblivion, she heard other feet racing to intercept her.

A tense, lustful face, red in the glow of the smoking torch, peered into her own. Instinctively she swung the torch at that mask of hatred and desire which froze the blood in her veins. She missed. The torch shot from her hand and the glowing coal of its tip bounded through the darkness, to expire in a constellation of crimson sparks. She felt her persecutor's claw of a hand upon her shoulder and his cold breath like a blast of death upon her cheek. Frenzied with loathing she wrenched herself free. He was between her and her heart's desire; to escape him she could only flee into the universal darkness.

But half conscious of where she was going she raced toward what she guessed was the cavern leading to the narrower secret exit. The very unconsciousness of her actions aided her. Where deliberate thought would have confused her, the lifelong habits of her unfeeling muscles took control automatically and urged her body unerringly toward its nearest safety.

Markoff did not make the mistake of immediate pursuit. He had watched and waited too long and too patiently for his opportunity to risk it in a confusion of blundering chases in the dark. Until certain of the way she was taking he could listen as coldly and as motionlessly as a dead snake. The inevitable change in the timbre of her footfalls would tell him when she entered a corridor, and the focussed sound of her flight would guide him unerringly to his prey. Every nerve of his lean body listened, as the sounds dwindled steadily in the distance, straining to detect the slight change in quality as she passed under an

invisible archway. Presently he caught the change. Turning his head slowly from side to side he fixed the direction of the sound. His muscles stiffened and he leaped into pursuit.

He had watched her every movement in the audience chamber, from the moment she led the marines out of it till the instant she reappeared after her last fruitless mission to the hiding places of the Moslems. During her long absences he speculated on her mission, imagining that she was gathering her people for an assault upon the shattered exit, or to lead them to freedom by the tunnel she had shown the American. To attack her while still uncertain of her friends' whereabouts would be foolhardy. Her cries might well be his death warrant. Only when she was almost to the eastern wall did Markoff feel safe in accosting her. Only the forbidden caves lay that way; she could not possibly summon help from them. The ambushes of her people all lay far underground and a mile or more to her rear. Her attempt to kill him with the bayonet had inflamed his passion to the point of insanity. Love and cruelty are indistinguishable to men of Markoff's kind, and passionate hatred is their equivalent for ungovernable desire. He would possess her now in his own way.

Creeping after her into a low corridor he heard her groping along its wall. Evidently she was feeling for some entrance she knew well. The sounds ceased. Stealing forward a step at a time Markoff felt every foot of the cold hall till he touched a void. Like a rattlesnake he squeezed silently into the narrow tunnel after her.

Before long she knew that she was followed. While she still had strength to crawl she would not fall into his hands. The roof of the cramping tunnel sloped rapidly down toward the floor. Progress was possible only on hands and knees. She heard him gaining. He was filled with an insane endurance; she, all but exhausted.

The limestone slope became as slippery as iced glass where the tunnel passed under the bed of a subterranean stream and the water dripped incessantly from the roof. Markoff slipped

in the slime, cursed, and lost twenty yards. Mad with rage at his mishap he wallowed in the slimy muck till his clothing and the green notebook in his coat pocket were soaked in the ice-cold limewater. Bracing his elbows against the walls of the tunnel he dragged himself up an inch at a time like a wounded snake trying to crawl out of a gopher hole.

White Lily was now fifty yards ahead. If her strength lasted another hour she would beat him to the exit. Then she might find her friends—they had offered to wait and look for her before she refused to escape as she was now escaping. Surely they would be within hail on the mountainside, and they could destroy or hold her tormentor till she escaped forever. Her senses clouded and she struggled through the last terrible hour in an agonized dream, too exhausted to know whether Markoff still followed or whether he had suffocated in the slime.

Her dream was more vivid than any reality. With an awful immediacy she knew that it was not a dream but the shadow of a living horror that brooded on her mind. Powerless to shake off her nameless fear, even when the tunnel permitted her to straighten up and run, she resigned herself to its clutch and wondered if she must be conscious of it forever. Did Hu suffer now as she was suffering? Were the converts right? Was this the eternity they had prophesied for her and her grandfather? She stumbled up the last steep slope, crouched to pass under the shelving roof, and dragged herself up to a moonlit desolution of shattered quartz. Instantly her mind cleared in the untainted air and she knew that the damnation prophesied by the converts was a lie. Her rest would be deep and dreamless.

Until her friends found her she must stay in the vicinity of that black hole in the quartz to see what issued. She would not venture to return to the audience chamber by the broader secret way until she knew beyond all doubt that the narrower had voided its snake. For all she knew Markoff might have crawled back to the caves. If at dawn he had failed to emerge she would hasten to the other exit and ask two of her friends

to see her safely back into the audience chamber.

She climbed a jagged pinnacle of quartz, found a ledge where she might rest, and scanned the moonlit mountainside for traces of her friends. Half a mile away a more massive outcrop of quartz had burst through the limestone. The tunnel she had shown Lane ended there, beneath a great rock in a small cave no larger than a panther's lair. This exit was well concealed beneath a loose jumble of huge blocks on the floor of a natural amphitheatre of quartz and limestone. It was in fact a replica on a grander scale of her own surroundings.

Half way down the moonlit slope of the farther outcrop she made out dark shadows that seemed to move. Were these her friends? Two black figures rose on the crest of the amphitheatre and dwindled down to the slope to join the others. From the build of the shorter she guessed it to be the old American who reminded her of Hu; the other might be the commander. They were safe. When Markoff emerged she could run across the intervening mountainside and soon be on her way in safety.

While White Lily watched for him, Markoff labored ever more slowly up the last hundred yards toward the moonlight and the clean night air. He, too, was troubled by fitful dreams of an all but supernatural reality. In his career as a seeker of pleasure he had experimented with certain of the rarer oriental drugs, only to abandon them all after one or two trials. They intensified his morbid fear of death to such a pitch that he gladly let them alone. The dreams—if they were dreams—that tortured him now were a million times worse than the worst any drug had ever induced. He began to mutter in Russian that he must be very ill; that White Lily had poisoned the tunnel with some Chinese drug of unnatural potency, and that he would never again see the sunrise. He experienced no pain—otherwise he would have shrieked. Nevertheless he felt horribly diseased to the very marrow of his bones. The girl must have poisoned the tunnel. He could smell the stuff now. Until this moment he had not noticed the faint odor of decay that crawled with him

like an aura. He stopped, panting. The smell had suddenly become a suffocating stench that made his reeling brain spin. Without the slightest premonitory twinge an infinite pain gripped every nerve of his being, and he fell instantly from the human state to a writhing thing that was neither human nor beast.

The inhuman shrieks that suddenly burst in appalling volume from the black hole in the rocks tattered the silence of the night to shreds. Half a mile away the sentries heard them and went as cold as ice. Even in battle they had never heard such sounds of agony. White Lily tumbled down the steep side of her lookout and, with her hands to her ears, fled across the slope to the Americans. No matter what the fiend had done he should not suffer like that. She must get one of the soldiers to shoot him.

Half way to her destination she met Lane and Saxby running to meet her. She could only point behind her. They raced on, hardly less fearful than she, while she fled with all her strength to outdistance those terrible sounds.

Stumbling down into the smaller amphitheatre they saw what looked like a man writhing its way out of the black hole. Freeing itself the yelling thing flopped and bounded over the rocks with horrible contortions that bent its back double.

"Shoot him!" Saxby shouted.

Unnerved by those awful sounds of torment Lane fired six times and missed. Expert marksmanship and a cool head might have put an end to the agony of that thing bounding over the jagged quartz like a fish jerked from the water. Lane had neither. He tried to reload but dropped the shells. Suddenly the thing collapsed like a jellyfish. Its sounds of pain increased beyond all endurance. Before he could seize a stone, Saxby saw Markoff's right hand, limp as the flipper of a dead seal, fumbling at a vest pocket. Evidently the man could still think. He still had memory, and he remembered the capsule in his pocket. The fumbling fingers crumpled and bent back double; the wrist curled up and the limp arm flowed down on the rocks, as an invisible

decay progressed swiftly through the bone from finger tips to shoulder socket. The bony skull suddenly settled like a collapsing balloon; the sounds of agony ceased instantly; the whole sprawling body lost its rigidity and became a sagging bag of pulp.

Unable to move, the two men stood staring down at what had been a human being. Like a recurrent dream the next act of a tragedy older than the human race began slowly before their eyes. As if he were following a once familiar change that he had witnessed a thousand times only to forget, Saxby anticipated each event before it happened. The sequence was stark reality itself; although each individual act contradicted the accepted harmony of nature. These things, too, were natural, but in an order of nature more ancient by aeons than the beginnings of evolution. Lane, knowing less than Saxby of what lay before them, felt more. It was his first experience with the older order. The foundering of the *Sheridan* was too abrupt to reveal its true significance to men battling for their lives in black waters. He felt more than Saxby now, because the changing substance of the dead man's body communicated directly with his own flesh and bone without the intermediary sophistication of thought.

The clothes of the dead man began to glisten in the moonlight as if stiff and brittle with hoar frost. Yet the night was sultry. A sleeve, rotted at the shoulder of the coat, crumbled and fell away. The frostiness of the rest thickened to a glittering fur of thousands of needlelike crystals. The rotten fabric collapsed under the increasing weight as the crystals grew, and fell with a tiny, fairy chime of tinkling glass to the quartz, exposing the shapeless arms and legs. A coat pocket collapsed. Yang's notebook, glittering with crystals, fell open, face down upon the quartz. On the bared flesh of the legs and arms, as delicately as an expert artist, an invisible worker rapidly etched the outlines of the skeleton as the completely dissolved substance of the bones sweated through the flesh. Simultaneously, the flattened head became a bejewelled hemisphere of densely packed

crystals that grew and multiplied visibly. Within twenty seconds the entire body was crusted over with a bristling pelt of glittering needles, whose steady growth filled the moonlit amphitheatre with a creeping, metallic rustle.

The rate of growth began doubling twice in every second. The air grew deathly cold and a slow breeze stirred among the rocks. Spears of splintering glass sprang from the quartz surrounding the body; the whole amphitheatre seemed to burst into crystalline life multiplying upon itself in explosive growth, and the rocks groaned and split asunder in travail to bring forth a new life.

"Out of it!" Saxby shouted, dragging the captain with him.

They fled for their lives back to the camp. Words were superfluous, even if they had had sufficient breath to utter them. Even Lane, who lacked Saxby's fuller knowledge, realized that Markoff, in discharging his debt to the world, had succeeded in passing his last bad check. Dead, he was infinitely more dangerous than he had ever been while living. In his crawl through the secret tunnel he had infected an entire mountain range with hellish life.

On reaching camp they were hailed by the missionary exulting like a madman.

"The Chinese girl has gone back to the accursed caves by the way we came out. She told me to tell you," he shouted to Saxby, "that she has gone to join her grandfather. 'Vengeance is mine, saith—' "

Saxby knocked him down.

BURIED

FOR THE TWO HOURS THAT REMAINED TILL dawn the men were ordered to sleep—if they could.

"You may march far," Saxby grimly informed the sergeant, "when you do start. So make the best of what is left of this hellish night. Better obey the captain's orders. Mere noises will mean nothing unless I yell."

Saxby and Lane kept watch with the sentries, never once taking their eyes off the wall of the farther amphitheatre. They had been watching about an hour when they saw a gleaming pinnacle suddenly rear its glittering spire above the wall in the moonlight, only to totter almost instantly and disappear. Three seconds later they heard the crash of a million tons of shattering glass. The men leapt to their feet and snatched their rifles. They had not slept. That appalling sound of destruction seemed to last for centuries. Instead of diminishing it increased with an incredible crescendo till it seemed that the whole mountainside must be an avalanche of brittle crystals smashing to bits. Then, as abruptly as a thunderclap, the racket ceased absolutely.

"Well?" said the captain. "Had we better be going?"

Saxby shook his head.

"Better rest. Tell the men it's over for tonight. That's the end of the stuff we saw growing."

"How do you know?" Lane felt strangely cold.

"I started to tell you in the cave when that crazy missionary over there butted in with his prophecy of a jehad that had already taken place. How many thousand years ago was it? Do you remember? I don't. It never happened or, if it did, it was utterly unimportant compared with what may happen next. That was merely a squabble among a few thousand Chinamen about a triviality. If it ever mattered—which I doubt—I have a feeling that it will never matter again. We may be about to fight an enemy the human race has never faced. But I trust not. If that terrific conflict does materialize—as it may—we shall find it wise to forget our petty brawls for a while. For if it breaks out it will be one against all and all against one. I have seen a shadow—no more—of what may be almost upon us. That is what I started to tell you about. You wouldn't have believed me, in spite of your wife's unsigned note. And I scarcely expect you to believe me now when I tell you why she did not sign that message. She was afraid of incriminating you through me. You were responsible, you know, for the wreck of the *Sheridan.*"

Lane stared at him.

"I don't wonder that your mind is temporarily unbalanced. Am I seeing things, too? Did I see Markoff die? Or was it just my imagination running wild after all that hell in the caves?"

"You saw that pinnacle fall a few moments ago," Saxby reminded him quietly. "So did I. And the men heard it as well as we. If you don't believe me, see what a devil of a time the noncoms are having to make the men lie down again."

"What did my wife ask you to tell me?" Lane demanded in a low tone. "Better not speak too loud. That sentry is on the jump as it is."

"Just this," Saxby began. "First, if you are questioned, to deny that you ever had anything to do with dyeing your boy's Easter eggs. That seems to have started everything—exactly how, I don't yet see. As a matter of fact I don't think you will ever be suspected. Your wife, Tom, and I are the only ones who

know. Isabel has bribed the boy to forget. She says he has sense and can be trusted. Now, let me give you a bald outline, without any theorizing, of precisely what has happened since you mixed that green dye. After seeing Markoff die and hearing one crash yourself you should be able to believe the rest."

Saxby then briefly detailed the unexplained circumstances surrounding Tom's fright, the "vision" of Dan and Jake, Yang's strange death and Isabel's experience in the desert.

"Yang," he concluded, "was mercifully stupefied by gin when the disease got him. Markoff was sober, in full possession of his senses. From his end we may guess that the disease—if it is such—is extremely painful in at least one of its forms. From my analysis of what has happened so far, I deduce as a working hypothesis the existence of two distinct types, and possibly a third. Again, as a tentative guess only, I find it suggestive to imagine that those crystals we saw growing, also the others in the desert and in Los Angeles, have some form of life. This may not be a very good hypothesis. Perhaps we had better say they have proto-life. This proto-life is not the common property that all crystals have of growing in their mother liquid. It is more closely akin to animal or plant life—to life in the ordinary sense. I do not believe these growths have intelligence as we commonly understand the term. A psychologist of the extreme behaviourist school would, of course, say that they have as good a claim to "intelligence" as we have. Their actions are their minds, and their minds are nothing more than their actions. However, we can defer metaphysics till the fight is over—if we are still alive to argue.

"All I wanted to point out is this. These crystalline masses that grow at such a prodigious rate seem to be of at least two distinct species. One feeds, if I may put it so, on silicon compounds as well as on lime compounds; the other seems to require cellulose. The mineral feeders find their nourishment in sand, quartz, lime—in fact in practically any kind of rock containing silica or calcium; the cellulose-feeders in such stuff as wood,

clothes or fabrics containing cotton, and so on. For anything I know to the contrary either kind may be able to live, for a short time at least, on the other's proper food. Now, I take it as practically certain that there were considerable quantities of lime in some form or another in the hold of the *Sheridan?"*

"We carried several tons of chloride of lime for sanitary purposes in camp."

"Check! Calcium chloride—that's what you had. The chlorine in the compound doesn't seem to count. The calcium does. What were those rocks in the outcrop where the burros were killed? Limestone—calcium carbonate. Again you have it. What about the bones of the burros? And what about the shell of Tom's green egg? Lime again. And so in Markoff's case. The crystal brutes that overgrew the burros were silicon feeders. The sheer weight of the crystal masses, nothing more nor less than huge cutting machines of brittle glass, sliced the carcasses to ribbons.

"On Tom's Easter egg there may have been a growth of both silicon-and lime-feeders and cellulose-feeders, although the cellulose kind undoubtedly predominated—witness the total disappearance of the cotton mat. There was, however, a characteristic odor of decay in this instance, as in that of the desert. I infer, therefore, that mineral feeders were also present. Probably they fed upon the dust that is under even the most sanitary bed. What interests me is this. There must have been a third kind present, a combined mineral-cellulose feeder, which crashed when it tried to walk. Some of the same variety must obviously have come to grief over there just a few moments ago; Markoff's clothes provided the cellulose, the rose quartz, the silicon. In the case of the egg I infer that the silicon-cellulose feeders have a more durable 'heart' than the pure silicon feeders. Otherwise your cat would not have been knocked out when he first sniffed the egg. As the full sunlight worked on this thin layer of living crystals they disintegrated—just as the mineral-feeders do. The essential characteristics of all are the same; they are truly different

kinds of one and the same life.

"What part the calcium compounds play in the life of these crystal brutes I don't yet see clearly. I suspect they are the necessary 'enzyme' that starts the terrific growth—the yeast, as it were. In each case so far there has been calcium present when the crystals began multiplying like a madman's nightmare. Even in the case of Yang we have it. Those four hard-boiled eggs murdered him. Their shells were mostly limestone. It was a silicon-feeder that got him. All the glass bottles in the laboratory were gone—vanished completely."

"I still don't see how you fit Tom's egg into your theory," Lane objected. "If you can't explain that, you will have to change everything."

"The thing in your boy's bedroom was mainly a cellulose-feeder," Saxby reiterated with some heat. "The cotton mat by the side of his bed had disappeared."

"But," Lane interrupted, "you say the green egg was found under the cot where Isabel put it."

"It was. The mat, when she hid the egg, was partly under the bed. She is not sure, but she thinks she remembers putting the egg on the corner of the mat under the bed."

"If your theory that lime starts the growth is correct that egg should not have had a shell left when the doctor found it."

"Not necessarily. I'll come to that in a minute. Only a very thin layer of the shell need have 'evaporated' to start the growth. The city chemist of course, not being told to look for anything of the sort, observed no suspicious thinness of the shell. He was concerned only with analyzing the green dye. So with Yang's four crushed eggs. I had no time to examine carefully what was left of the shells."

"I think you'll find," Lane remarked, "a fourth kind of feeder among your infernal crystals. A pure calcium eater."

"Not till I find it. I see certain evidence for another explanation. The calcium, I'm willing to bet, is responsible for the sex of these brutes. Oh, I know I'm crazy—have been all

my life. That's why I have done some things better men couldn't do. These crystals, I suspect, have three kinds of sex—male, female and bisexual. The last correspond to certain kinds of plants or flowers. The other two are more like most animals. All this, of course, is only a crude analogy, for the crystal monsters are neither plant nor animal. They're far more ancient than either."

"What I want to know is how are we to stop them breaking out again?"

"Possibly we have seen the end of the whole story. If a certain theory of mine is correct, we have."

"Then why did you insist that we may be in for the greatest fight in history?"

"Because my optimistic theory may be wrong. Any man with a scientific training knows that even the most perfect and most logical theory is likely to be smashed at any moment by a single apparently insignificant fact. I can put mine to the test now. I believe these crystal brutes can breed and grow only in light of a certain quality. Direct sunlight is fatal to them. Total absence of light prevents them getting a start toward life. Moonlight, direct or diffused, seems to be just right. The actinic rays of the sunlight are either not present or are so diluted as to be negligible in the light reflected from the moon. You can't take much of a photograph by moonlight. The crystal brutes must have their light weak or they don't breed. If it is too diluted, they perish. In total darkness they don't even seem to begin to live. They seem to be fastidious about their light as animals and bacteria are about their temperature and humidity. Unless both lie in very narrow ranges your animal dies. Now, in all instances so far, the crystal brutes have come to birth, bred and lived only in moonlight.

"Both the quality and quantity of light present seem to determine the period of gestation of these crystal brutes or, if you prefer, the term of incubation. *When* your wife infected the rock outcrop in the desert is not known. I suspect it was *not*

when she prepared supper, but early the following morning, while cleaning up to leave camp. The refuse may have been the plague spot, although Mrs. Lane thinks the rock was infected by her clothes. If so, the infection did not reach the silicon in the crack which Tom observed until some time the following day. The full sunlight held the life of the crystals in abeyance all that day; the moonlight started them breeding, and the 'rats' got the full benefit.

"Again, as to Tom's egg. Before leaving Shanghai I verified that the moon was shining into your boy's room the night all this started."

"Did you ever see Tom's cot?" Lane asked quietly.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because it has a heavy Mexican horsehair valence all around it clear to the floor."

"So much the better for my theory. The brute in his room cannot have been nearly so large as any of the others. It seems to have been a pretty feeble specimen; it tottered and crashed of its own weight. It was like a rickety child deprived of direct sunlight. The amount of light that could diffuse through the slit between the valence and the floor by reflection from the walls would be practically negligible. The egg was almost, but not quite, in total darkness. Its infernal offspring, generated from the cellulose of the cotton mat, was therefore a puny little devil with no stamina—luckily for Tom."

"All right," said Lane. "I won't argue with a scientist. What about the *Sheridan?*"

"You mean how did the moonlight diffuse into the hold and start things going? That's simple. Through the portholes, of course. The diffused moonlight started the spots of dye on your shirt. Your wife told me you changed it at the last moment before starting. It was in your dunnage bag, of course?"

"Suppose it was. What then?"

"It must have been in the hold, probably, although you would not know, not far from your supply of chloride of lime.

Then we have simply a repetition of the essential conditions of Tom's bedroom. With hundreds of dunnage bags, themselves cotton and stuffed with clothes also mostly cotton, the cellulose-feeders had an ideal propagating place."

"And they grew at such a rate that they burst the ship?"

"Precisely. A pan of dough swells to several times its initial size when the yeast gets to working well. These tons of cotton bags and clothes grew so fast into crystal masses that the effect was practically a silent explosion. From my observation of the thing in the desert, I conclude that the crystals are strong, extremely brittle, and *hollow*. Certainly some of them were filled with some substance, probably like the neon and mercury gases in tubular electric signs, that glows from blue to red. The crystals at first are probably almost solid throughout. As they grow they hollow progressively and fill with gas. The gas, I take it, is the equivalent, in their kind of life, of the blood of animals or the chlorophyll of most plants. Being a mere shell when full grown, the bulk of the crystal would be thousands of times that of the compact food from which it grew. An enormous pressure would be exerted by a rapidly growing mass of such crystals before they all suddenly collapsed."

"Yes, and then what? Why didn't Isabel find any trace of the thing after it smashed? And why didn't you or those prospectors find any broken crystals in the desert?"

"Easy. One of these living crystals dies instantly if it is broken. Scratch certain kinds of glass and they fly to pieces."

"You always find the pieces."

"Of course. But suppose that condition was intensified a millionfold. There would be nothing left but a very fine dust. If colorless, as it probably is from these crystals, it would be difficult to detect. That explains, possibly, why Isabel noticed no dust on the floor of Tom's bedroom."

"It may."

"You are no more skeptical than I am. It is more probable that when a living crystal 'dies' it ceases to be a solid and sub-

limates instantaneously to a gas. That accounts for the terrible smell that is always present. The odor is characteristic, although unlike any with which I am familiar in chemistry. Yet, I am willing to believe almost anything about the smell of a silicon compound, and there are some pretty tough ones that can be generated from cellulose as a base. Most dabblers think the sulphur compounds are the worst. An expert in other elements knows better—or worse, according to the way you feel about such things."

"All right," Lane remarked. "Let us go back to the *Sheridan* for a moment? How did the green dye on my soiled shirt ever come in contact with the chloride of lime? You say calcium compounds are necessary to start the crystals living."

"Contact is unnecessary. See what happened to the glass bottles in Yang's laboratories. It is sufficient that the subtle gas, or emanation if you like, from the green dye shall diffuse and attack the lime—which may be a hundred feet away. The effect would be very slight, judged by any scale the layman might apply, yet chemists and physicists work habitually with traces of gases as dilute as those required by our theory, and even with quantities much smaller. It is not the size of things that is important; it is their qualities. This is a commonplace of everyday life. Seventy years ago the 'authorities' would have locked you up in an asylum if you had told them that you could wipe out a whole population with a pinprick. Yet, that is all that is necessary today, and you experts may be using just that sort of a weapon in your next human war. Your apparently clean pin may be a thriving metropolis of carefully selected disease germs. Infect one man under the right conditions and your grand offensive is launched toward a devastating victory. Only," he added with a wry smile, "nature may stop us before we can start that sort of thing."

"There is one objection to your theory," Lane remarked, ignoring the compliment to the foresight of certain leaders in his own profession. "This emanation from the green dye never

got a chance at our chloride of lime. The lime was all packed in airtight cans."

"Airtight? A lot you know about cans. I'll bet the lids on half of them were as loose as ashes. Probably one or two had even slipped their covers completely in the manhandling of loading. I've watched stevedores at work. After spilling half a can over the dunnage bags the men slapped on the cover and let it go."

"Well, I can neither prove nor disprove what you say. I'm willing to accept the loose lids on those cans."

"So am I. They must have been loose. Otherwise the *Sheridan* would be afloat now."

"And you say this green dye is probably some sort of a freak that may not turn up again in chemistry for millions of years?"

"I hope so. It is probably a highly complex compound that is formed only under an extremely rare combination of circumstances—correct heat, proper concentration, and perhaps fifty more.

"When you dyed Tom's Easter eggs you hit the right connections by accident. Yang was an expert. He was one of the most skillful technicians in the world. When he saw queer chemical reactions happening before his very eyes, he babied and encouraged them in every way to be themselves. They gave the hints; he merely followed to the best of his ability. His notebook shows that." Saxby stopped abruptly. "By the way, what has happened to that infernal notebook? Is it still in the caves?"

"I saw it fall out of Markoff's pocket when his coat rotted. Didn't you?"

"No. I couldn't take my eyes off his head. Are you sure you saw it?"

"Positive."

"Then we must go back and get it at once." He glanced at his gloved hands. "Thank Heaven Markoff let my hands alone. You mustn't touch it. The gloves may not be any real

protection. Still, we know what happens when flesh that has been in contact with limestone or limewater touches the green dye. The emanation penetrates the flesh and rots the lime of the bones to liquid. If that isn't exactly what happens the fact is equally unpleasant."

"But what can you do with the infernal thing?" Lane demanded.

"I'll fly back to Shanghai with it. Then I'll take another plane and fly a thousand miles out to sea and drop it. You needn't come now. I'll get it and be back by sunrise."

"Just a word before you go. Your theory seems to be off so far as the *Sheridan* is concerned. There was no smell of decay."

"Of course not. She went down before all the crystals had time to sublimate. You smelled nothing because you were too excited trying to swim to the raft. Such gas as had already been given off in the hold of the ship dissolved in the water. Probably the gas is more soluble in water than ammonia. Anyhow, the facts indicate that it is."

"Very well. There is just one more point. You said those living crystals couldn't breed in total darkness or in full sunlight. And you supposed there was enough moonlight diffused through the portholes to start the breeding of the emanation on the lime and the cotton clothes. Again I say all right. Now for the awkward fact that demolishes your theory. The dunnage—all those clothes—and all of the chloride of lime were stored in the lower hold, far below the water line. There was not a single porthole in that hold. The very faint light required by your theory was in the sea water no doubt, even at the depth of the lower hold. But there was no possible chink or hole by which it could have filtered through to the dunnage."

"What about the hatchways between the upper and lower holds?" Saxby snapped.

"All closed tight as drums with hundreds of tons of military supplies holding them down. I guess your theory is sunk like the *Sheridan*."

"Not at all! Modified, that's all, and most beautifully. There must be a third species of crystal monsters, a cellulose-feeder, that breeds in the dark. Why, my theory is better than ever! I don't have to tinker with diffused moonlight to account for what happened under Tom's cot. Don't you see? There may be only two essential species after all—a darkness-breeding cellulose-feeder and a moonlight-loving silicon-eater. But if there is a third—"

"Whang!"

It was not a sunrise gun from Teng-shan that cut short Saxby's rather unscientific defense of his optimistic theory. The ear splitting shot that seemed to pierce his very brain was the characteristic note emitted by the sudden fracture of a vast body of rock under tension. Those who have never enjoyed the experience of such a sound may get a faint echo of it by sticking their heads into a bathtub of water while a friend bangs two sledge hammers together, under water, within an inch of the ear. That shot was heard in Teng-shan and in all the villages within a radius of fifty miles of it. The governor, recovering slowly in his palace, had a bad relapse. The wretches imprisoned by thousands in the caves heard in it the voice of their doom. The pilot of the bombing plane stiffened his muscles and gave his bird the gas. The marines had difficulty in making their legs behave. The earth jarred slightly, but there was no earthquake. The most important consequence of that report was the conspicuous hole which it shot through the middle of Saxby's theory.

"That happened half a mile underground," he remarked when Lane could hear. "Markoff infected his tunnel thoroughly when he squeezed through it with that infernal notebook in his pocket. And it must have been pitch dark in there. I guess you're right. One kind at least of the living crystals does breed in absolute darkness. I suspected that this might prove to be so. This makes the whole situation worse than I expected. The caves will be polluted for years and Kansu will become the plague spot of the world. What I hoped would not happen has

happened. Nature has declared war on the human race. We had better get out of here and warn the people of Teng-shan as fast as we can."

"What about Yang's notebook?"

"It may as well stay where it is. I probably should not be able to get it before the big smash comes anyway. Keep your head and make for the open plain as hard as the men can go. Don't wait for me. I'll follow at my own pace."

Lane shouted an order. The men fell in, and the column thundered by on its way to the plain. The missionary, Lane, and Saxby stood watching them pass. The sun rose, and with it the morning breeze. Almost suffocating them, a foul odor of decay drifted over from the amphitheatre. Their brains reeled.

"Take the interpreter and hurry to the governor," Saxby advised Lane. "No. Don't hang back for me. My feet are all right if I should have to run. I'm taking a professional interest in this," he called after the retreating figures. "I've been a collector all my life. See you later in Teng-shan if it's still there."

He followed as fast as he could, deliberately ignoring the pain from his burns. "Well," he remarked to himself, "if it must come, it will be worth seeing. I wouldn't sell my ticket to the show for a million dollars, even if I shall never see another sunrise for staying. Nature is greater than mere life; nature is infinite, life finite."

When, an hour or so later, Saxby hobbled down the last ten yards of the slope, he felt sorely disappointed. Nothing whatever had happened. Had he sent the marines on a fool's errand? They were to warn the governor and assist in evacuating Teng-shan of its inhabitants. For what? Perhaps nothing. Although humanely concerned about the possible fate of the Chinese, Saxby could not repress a sigh of regret that the finest specimen in his collection had failed to materialize. It remained only a hypothesis. He felt like an entomologist awakening from a dream of grabbing purple butterflies a yard square only to find a slapped mosquito in his hand. He trudged on to the

village, resolved never again to theorize so long as he lived. Metaphysics is better left to the next world. It is worse than gin.

While the marines hastened to Teng-shan and Saxby trudged after them, the pilot of the bombing plane soared above the mountains searching for his fellow Americans. Never having heard the crack of snapping rock before, he interpreted the shot that altered Saxby's theory as the explosion of a huge military mine. Somehow, he thought, the marines had captured the entire store of explosives of the Chinese and were blasting their way out of the caves. Since bombing the guard room and blocking the caves, he and the mechanician had spent some pretty anxious hours. Had they done what Lane really wanted? It seemed so rash that they doubted. Worse, the Chinese gunners, headed by the governor in person, had paid a brief visit of inspection to the plane. The plane's forward and aft machine guns were observed by the visitors. They kept a respectful distance. Nevertheless their superstitious fear of the monster was rapidly evaporating. The pilot could not help feeling that, when they retired, they left merely to devise some practicable method of attack. He did not feel justified in leaving the spot until the captain sent definite word. The marines might still have need of his services. When the supposed mine explosion shattered the dawn, he shot over the mountains looking for the crater. Hoping to find it soon he planned to circle it, making all the racket he could, to scare off the Chinese till the marines escaped.

Forty minutes of criss-cross flying over the range revealed nothing remarkable. The aviators became puzzled. Surely there should have been a column of dust after the explosion? They began to fear that the explosion was of Chinese origin, deep in the caves, and that the marines were its victims.

A sudden shout from the mechanician, acting as observer at the moment, caused the pilot to look down. On the floor of a natural amphitheatre directly beneath the place he saw unmistakable evidence of bloodshed. The outline of a solitary human body encrimsoned the rock. No other evidence of a con-

flict was visible. After a short consultation they decided to land and investigate. A mile and a half from the amphitheatre they spied a safe landing place on the slope and came down.

Revolvers in hand, although they expected no ambush, they hurried up the mountainside. Not a soul molested them. As they drew near the wall of the amphitheatre they noticed a faint odor of decay.

"There's been fighting here," the pilot remarked. "Watch your step. Take that way up—to the left, and keep your eyes peeled."

"That's no battlefield smell," the mechanician retorted, picking his way over the huge blocks of quartz. "It's different and a sight worse. It smells like rotten metal. Don't you get it?"

"Get it? I'll say I do." They were passing through the shadow of a tall pinnacle at the moment. "Makes you feel groggy, doesn't it? Do you suppose the Chinese are using a new gas?"

"Smells like it," the other agreed as they emerged into brilliant sunshine. "That's queer. It's completely gone now."

"Must be a heavy gas that evaporates in the sun," the pilot hazarded. "We had better keep out of the shade after this. I'll bet the Chinese have a new explosive, too. These are its fumes."

"Look out!" the mechanician yelled. "We're stepping slap into a path of snakes. Well, I'm hanged! They're all dead—bushels of them."

Before them lay a deep rock basin just under the lowest point of the rim. It was full of hideous snakes of all sizes and colors, tied into still knots of frozen pain. Evidently the whole reptile population of the amphitheatre had boiled out of its dens in a futile attempt to escape a sudden peril. They had instinctively chosen the shortest way over the dip, only to writhe into the basin from which they were powerless to escape. Even a snake cannot get very far without bones.

The mechanician, who prided himself on being a hard-boiled guy, grasped one of the largest snakes just behind its flat,

evil head, and yanked it free of its twisted brothers.

"I guess it's dead, all right," he grinned. He cracked it like a whip. "Limp as a kelpie. Here, let's see your teeth."

For the first time he noticed that the vicious jaw, unlike the resolute firmness of the average snake's mouth, hung limply apart.

"Look here!" he exclaimed to the pilot, "it's some sort of a sucker. It has no fangs."

"Nor bones, I guess," the pilot added, pinching the horny lips together. "Snakes usually have jaw-bones, don't they?"

"Sure, to hold the fangs in place when they bite. I wonder what killed them?" He sniffed the cold skin. "Fresh as a mountain trout," he commented critically. "I guess the Chinese gassed them. We'd better look out."

Before passing over the rim they inspected twenty or more of the snakes. Not one had bone or fang in its limp body.

"Well, I'm glad they're dead," the pilot remarked, "even if they couldn't bite."

A shout of horror burst from his throat. He had seen Markoff. What looked from the air like a man lying on his back in a crimson pool appeared from a closer view as nothing that had ever been human. Only a darker pattern on the shapeless stain recalled a blurred outline of a thing with arms and legs. The living crystals had done to Markoff what they did to the burros in the desert.

The men forced themselves to investigate; the remains might be those of an American. What they first found was sufficiently puzzling to men who knew nothing of the circumstances of Markoff's death. Their find consisted of two leather boots and exactly ten metal buttons. Whoever had slashed his victim in this incredibly shocking manner had evidently first stripped the wretch of his clothes, for not a vestige of clothing remained. But why had the murderer discarded the metal buttons? Ten buttons won't hold a man's clothes together. The others had evidently taken the assassin's fancy. He seemed to have kept

them. Indeed "he" had, although the men could not guess why. The remaining buttons were of bone. They concluded that what lay before them was the work of a madman.

It was the mechanician, still subconsciously impressed by his handling of the snakes, who first observed that there were no bones under those red strands. The discovery sickened him. The supposed madman had murdered his victim for the skeleton. But, as the pilot soon discovered by looking in two of the four likeliest places, the assassin had thrown away the victim's nails. There were exactly ten. Had he looked in the grotesque leather boots he might have found ten more.

The pilot slipped. His foot kicked a small, oblong object free of the mess. The thing tinkled as fragments broke off in its skip over the uneven quartz. For all the world it looked exactly like a stone book, which is precisely what it was.

The book was open at its middle page. The pilot took out his handkerchief and picked up the book. The open stone pages wiped easily. They were as smooth as glass, evidently of pure quartz. As an object of art the thing was priceless.

At first the men thought it represented the lifelong labor of some infinitely patient Chinese artist in crystal. In the museum at Shanghai they had seen miraculous carvings in rock crystal, but this surpassed them all. Its thin pages could not be turned, of course; otherwise they were perfect, each an individual work of art. Its coloring, too, apparently natural, was exquisitely delicate. The open pages were mottled with a Chinese green like the rarest jade, and the edges of the fast shut pages showed that every one, though invisible, was equally beautiful. On the open pages a curiously regular pattern of extremely faint, metallic gray enhanced the irregular green as if it had grown there. This pattern seemed to be embedded in the thin pages.

The pilot was a college graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering. The suspiciously "human" regularity of that gray pattern fascinated him, and for a moment he forgot his surroundings. He found himself deciphering what he saw.

"I'm crazy," he muttered. "Here, see if you make anything out of this."

He indicated a cloudy gray spot in the middle of the page. The mechanician had good eyes.

"243.7," he read slowly. "I'm not sure about the decimal point."

"That's what I think I see. So I'm probably right about the rest." He read aloud, a letter at a time, a short chemical equation. "Now I know," he remarked in a strained voice, "what that mess on the rocks is. It is what is left of Mr. Saxby."

"How do you know?"

"This is the book he kept pulling out of his pocket and reading when he thought we were going to crash in the fog."

"But his book was paper—just a common notebook."

"I know. This is the same book. I saw him studying it in Shanghai while you were tuning up. There's no use arguing. I don't understand what all this is about. It has happened. That's all."

"What had we better do?"

"Hanged if I know. If Mr. Saxby got out, probably the others did too. There's a hole. They may have come out that way. If they did, they weren't killed here. I suppose we had better continue the search till our gas gets too low. Then we may as well fly back and tell General Maitland."

"He'll call us liars."

"I'll take the book along. It proves something, but I don't know what. I wish we could bury that."

"There's no dirt within a mile. Come on; I'm sick."

Looking up at the cloudless blue before they took off, they saw four black shapes, wheeling slowly above the amphitheatre on motionless wings in the morning sunshine.

"He won't need burying," the mechanician remarked. "What a sight to see before breakfast! Give her the gas!"

12

FROM THE GRAVE

IT WAS NO CYNIC, BUT ONE OF THE WORLD'S most human poets, who observed that the evil men do lives after them, while the good is buried with their bones. For obvious reasons the scavengers of the air could not inter Markoff's good with his bones. This, however, did not nullify the first part of Shakespeare's profound theorem with respect to him. Markoff was dead, indeed; his evil was still as lusty as four vultures. In fact, as the day wore on, it almost seemed as if Markoff himself were rising from the dead. It is only a slight coloring of the sober facts to say, metaphorically, that he rose from the grave a few minutes after eight on the evening of the day following his fleshly burial.

When the bombing plane soared aloft from the place of death to reconnoiter for the marines the morning was still young. The aviators flew first toward the pass into Shen-si, thinking that the marines, if indeed they had escaped, would be getting out of Kansu as fast as possible. Their job with regard to the missionaries having evaporated, there was no reason why they should linger to tempt the touchy Chinese.

Just as the aviators flew over the pass, nature fired her second shot in the war against living things, or rather she fired a volley. In rapid succession a series of ear-splitting concussions

jarred the air like titanic battering rams hammering at the steel barriers of an impregnable fortress, as stratum after stratum of the subterranean rocks suddenly split and burst asunder.

Knowing that the marines could not have marched farther than the pass, the aviators wheeled about and whizzed back toward Teng-shan. Glancing down they saw a succession of furrowed billows racing with incredible speed over the plain from the mountains of the caverns to the far horizon where they seemed to break. Farms and villages rose and fell like helpless rafts as the long furrows swept under them on their race to the northern deserts. Each volley fired by the snapping strata sent a fresh train of earth waves speeding over the plain in parallel ridges, till, without warning, the forces of nature opened their grand offensive from four fronts at once, and four furrowed tides fought to possess and destroy the battlefield. The waves in each of those tidal armies swept on in parallel regiments, but each army pursued its own direction from the base of the mountains out over the plain. As the crests of one tide reenforced those of another the heaving earth suddenly shot upward on a crest twice the height of either; as hollow met hollow, farms and villages were snatched from sight faster than they could have fallen down a void; where four crests met the brown earth was tossed high into the air in blocks of shattered spray a mile square, and where three or four hollows crashed together rocks, men, tress and cattle—everything—was pulverized and ground together into paste.

The roar of the conflicting tides drowned the sharp crescendo of the snapping strata; huge fissures miles long crossed and criss-crossed the choppy sea one instant only to vanish the next, and slowly the whole mountain range of the caverns, with a shudder that shook the very sky, slipped from the core of rock to which it had been moored for a million years and began to flow over the plain. Momentarily the tides subsided. The steady roar of the advancing tidal wave of earth and rock—a whole mountain range in motion—gathered volume as the moving

mass slowly gained momentum and marched upon the shattered plain to submerge it in a deluge of crumbled rock. No man-made noise could survive above the thunder of that billow curling over the wash of stone avalanches that prepared its way and made its flow smooth; the men in the bombing plane, hovering over the column of dust that had been Teng-shan, no longer were aware of their own incessant racket.

When the first shock came, Saxby and the captain had just concluded their interview with the governor of Kansu. The last words of that skeptical Chinaman were addressed to Saxby through the missionary.

"Why should I warn the people of Teng-shan and the farmers of Kansu to flee? This man," meaning Lane, "has lied about the Americans in Shan-si. I questioned," here he smiled significantly, "the Christian telegraph operator. He told me everything before he died. He was a truthful boy. So when you say there is to be an earthquake that will shake Kansu from the mountains to the desert, I think you are lying. When we run away you stay behind and loot. Markoff has told me that all Americans are liars and capitalists. I believe him. You came to Kansu to rob us. The missionaries were an excuse. I am justified in executing you and all of your men, and I shall do so. You have rifles but no machine guns. Last night my soldiers carried back their machine guns that you tried to rob them of, and strengthened the defenses of this palace. Your men are now trespassing on my grounds. They do not see the machine guns, for my men are well hidden. If Kansu is to suffer an earthquake, as you say, you will never know it."

The governor himself never knew what happened. The missionary had not quite finished translating the governor's speech—the details of Lane's and Saxby's sentence had not yet been translated—when a heavy beam from the ceiling smashed the governor's table to splinters, brained him, squashed the missionary and two of the guards, and totally disabled the remaining four.

Saxby and the captain found themselves in the governor's

private garden just as the palace collapsed. They remembered a wall that suddenly opened like a door, a leap, and nothing more. The marines, standing at ease under the mulberry trees, were not crushed by falling buildings as were the Chinese soldiers tensely waiting to open fire at the governor's order.

As for the rest of Teng-shan, it experienced all the usual freaks that accompany major earthquakes. Out of a group of twenty human beings, all apparently exposed to precisely the same hazard, nineteen would be killed outright while the twentieth escaped without a scratch. One man too terrified to run would weather the cataclysm unharmed; his more prudent friend, abandoning him to his fate, stepped instantly into a gaping chasm, not two feet away, that opened to receive him and closed immediately. One squad of marines, reeling after another to a supposedly safer spot, saw eight men vanish without ever knowing where they went.

Of Teng-shan itself not one stick of house or hovel remained in the place where the builders had put it, and, literally, not one stone or brick was left upon another. They were pulverized. Yet hundreds of human beings came through as sound as ever, or with only minor injuries.

The great mass of the population was destroyed in the first two shocks; the succeeding waves alternately buried and disinterred the victims with a sublime cynicism as indecent as any of nature's franker brutalities. Restraint and reason are for human beings, in order that nature may drug them into a false security; she herself has no other use for either. Science would seek to put a bit in her savage mouth; she submits, to delude her dupes, and then, when they least expect it, tramples them underfoot and goes unhindered on her way.

Yet man, the incorrigible optimist and practical opportunist, discounts the worst nature can do. The major shocks of that terrific earthquake, the maddest prank that nature ever played on a superstitious race, had barely subsided before the survivors were stripping poor trifles of silver and jade from the fingers

of the dead and rifling their clothes for cash. In earthquakes, in fire, and in shipwrecks the rule is the same; at least some of the survivors demonstrate their fitness to survive by plundering those who have perished. And why not, these children of nature ask; what use has a corpse for rings or money? Their logic is as irrefutable as Mother Nature's.

The marines lost a third of their force. The rest, as soon as the ground stopped heaving sufficiently to permit them to stagger, began systematically searching the ruins of the palace—for imprisoned survivors only. They found none. Lane reorganized his force with the purpose of similarly combing the ruins of the whole town. The Chinese themselves, except those engaged in looting, were incapable of any rational act. Orders had to be given by signs and shoutings into ears; the rumble of the oncoming billows of shattered rock made any other means of communicating impossible. They heard the stupendous roar, of course, and guessed that worse was to come, but they could not imagine what was happening. At the moment they were at the bottom of a vast pit that formerly had been the palace grounds. They could not see over its rim as they were too close to the steepest part of the wall.

Saxby scrambled up first and saw what was about to overwhelm the ruins of Teng-shan. By frantic signals he brought the men out of the pit in record time. They did not stop for a second look. The first was sufficient to send them fleeing from the oncoming wave, every man for himself and the devil take discipline.

Saxby himself could not run. Not that he was paralyzed with fear, or too stiff from his painfully healing burns; he simply lacked the volition to run. All his mature life he had collected and loved earthquakes, and now he saw one the like of which the world had never witnessed in historic times. The "Kansu catastrophe," as it has since been named, was unique, and Saxby, the connoisseur of earthquakes, realized instantly the rarity of the spectacle. Lane, thinking Saxby was following, pursued his

routed troops.

It was a sight to make any lover of nature pause. The stupendous volume of sound, as that crashing symphony of destruction rose and fell with the periodic surge of the shattered rocks, alone would have stunned the average spectator into helpless immobility. But Saxby was not average. He stayed where he stood because he wanted to enjoy it to its last avalanche of crushed rock and its last splitting discord. It was nature at her mightiest, trampling the world like an ant hill, irresistible, ungovernable, and her admirer would witness her triumphal march if it cost him his life.

He had witnessed the puny efforts of men to destroy their own kind, and the sight had nauseated him; now he would see nature demolish herself, impartially, completely, and cleanly. As far as the eye could reach the spectacle was continuously sublime. In serried billows a whole mountain range rolled forward, toppling over upon itself when some unshattered core of rock offered a moment's futile resistance to the onrushing flood, surging forward majestically over the wash of the avalanches that fingered their way forward to feel out the terrain, leaping skyward, when the obstruction yielded, tumbling and curling forward in vaster volume, again damming up over some more obstinate resistance, and again conquering, mightier than ever. A shriller, brittle din pierced the roar of the stone billows, as if millions of tons of glass were being ground to powder beneath the flood, and Saxby knew what was coming, invisibly, before it arrived.

Nature, human, animal or other, is incomprehensible. The French peasants gathered their harvests while all the hell of battle girdled their fields with a sea of fire. Between Tengshan and the marching mountains a sturdy, shaggy little Chinese pony tried courageously to keep its legs on what had once been its pasture—now a jumbled desolation of disinterred rocks and chaotic clods as big as houses. Though the jarring earth tumbled stones and clods all about it, the persistent pony stuck like a burr

to the one patch of turf in all that heaving wilderness. Its legs straddling wide apart like a spider's, with determination worthy of a general resolved to hold the front line at the cost of a hundred thousand of his men if necessary, the courageous pony cropped the grass. In spite of himself Saxby admired the little beast's obstinate, natural, ignorant courage. He even felt a sympathy for it; the pony refused to run because of the hunger of its belly; he, the man, was risking his life to appease the cravings of his aesthetic nature. Suddenly the pony collapsed as if pole-axed. It did not even kick. If not done for it was at least knocked out—cold.

Saxby felt that it was time to retreat. The pony's collapse was exactly like that of the firemen and the doctor when they stuck their heads under Tom's cot. A heavy gas, colorless and lethal, was creeping forward in advance of the tide. Thus far there had been no odor; the sun had not yet volatilized the corruption that seeped from the base of the rotting mountains. The gas of course was only a hypothesis. Saxby, however, believed in it sufficiently to turn his back on the grandest of all the avalanches he had so far witnessed, and run as hard as he could in the opposite direction. When he noticed also that a cold breeze, colder than the wind from an ice floe, was blowing in his face, he doubled his speed.

"Gad!" he panted, "what a fool I've been. I guess I'm dished this time."

Doubtless he deserved the worst, but he did not get it. The pilot of the bombing plane had early located the Americans with his field glasses and had followed their precipitate retreat from the pit. He had also observed that one of their number, possibly because too scared to move, stayed behind. For forty minutes the pilot had been endeavoring to attract the laggard's attention by all the noises at his command, as he wheeled in a narrow circle a thousand feet above the loiterer's head. His noise was nothing in competition with nature's, and Saxby, with no eyes for anything but the greatest earthquake in history, never thought of

looking up at the zenith. Seeing that the loiterer had at last found his legs, the pilot swooped low and flew in front of him, guiding Saxby to his invisible companions floundering in a vast crater two miles away.

Saxby's best was not quite good enough. Glancing back the pilot saw him stumble and fall just as a fresh avalanche roared down from the main mass to within a hundred yards of the fallen man. From his observations on the progress of the tide the pilot estimated that it would be only about four minutes till the tottering crest followed the wash of the avalanche to sweep clean over it and gain a quarter of a mile in a single surge.

Saxby was on his feet again, but not running. He could not; even his iron endurance had almost reached its limit. The pilot had to act instantly or abandon the man to his doom. He acted. By the kind of miracle that favors the courageous, he brought the careening plane to rest on the hummocky ground all cluttered with ruins, just ten feet short of a crevasse that would have swallowed it, and within running distance of Saxby. The mechanician was over the side and on his way before the plane stopped. The pilot climbed out and by brute force, exerted on the tail of his bird, slewed it round for the take-off. A quarter turn brought it into position for a start that might not end in a smashed propeller or a plunge into a fissure—if they were lucky.

When the mechanician saw who it was that he was rescuing, he yelled.

"You're dead!" he shouted.

Saxby didn't hear, and the mechanician, ready to believe that this too was merely an incident in the general nightmare, did not stop to argue. He hustled Saxby to the plane and into it. One shock more to the pilot's nerves meant little. He accepted Saxby as a fact and took off, mentally balancing the probability of a smash from the rear against an equally likely crash ahead. The tide roared after them just as the plane moved forward; half a ton of shattered rock burst like a bomb against

the fuselage and jagged fragments shot past their heads as they ducked or dodged, but they made it—how, they never knew. Take a chance and win is the airman's motto.

They could not land in the marines' new crater; one miracle a day is enough. Flying on at a low speed they found a practicable stretch of alluvial dirt, not too violently furrowed and fissured by the earthquake, about five miles beyond the crater. Landing, they waited for the others to overtake them. Eventually only Saxby waited; the aviators departed in haste ten minutes after they stopped.

At this distance from the stone tide it was possible to carry on a conversation by shouting. The first thing the pilot wished to know was who the dead man was.

"What dead man?" Saxby shouted.

The pilot described the place where they had found the mess. Saxby informed the aviators that it was a Russian agent—the man responsible for all the trouble with the Chinese.

"The Chinks got even with him. They cut him up and boned him like a chicken tamale," the mechanician bellowed. "Made me sick."

Saxby recognized the symptoms.

"It's a new disease," he shouted. It would have taken hours to state the facts adequately. To his intense astonishment the pilot broke the startling news that they had thought the remains were Saxby's.

"Why?"

"Because we found your book—or one just like it—made of glass or crystal. See here."

The pilot led Saxby back to the plane and produced Yang's crystallized notebook. Saxby got the shock of his life.

"Don't drop it!" he yelled. "Keep it away from any kind of earth—put it back in the plane! That's the cause of all this. Put it back, I say!"

Somewhat bewildered the pilot obeyed. So many insane things had happened already that one more might be accepted

as part of the nightmare. Saxby continued, speaking rapidly.

"I was going to wait for Captain Lane to give you your flying orders. General Maitland ordered you to do as I directed; I'll not wait for Lane. Don't think I'm crazy—I'm not. Lane would order you to do exactly as I say. I predicted the earthquake from my knowledge of that book. We were warning the governor when the first shock verified my prediction. If that infernal book comes in contact with lime and silicon dioxide—common sand, quartz, granite—almost any mineral—it may start another earthquake worse than this. I don't know whether it will or not, but I'll take no chances. This terrific earthquake is only the least of what may be coming. Fly back to Shanghai with that thing, and don't stop till you get there. Don't touch anything but your plane, and don't take the book out of it. You must not get out of the plane. Send for General Maitland and tell him that I advise this.

"First, your plane is to be refueled for a flight to the most convenient American war vessel that is not less than five hundred miles from the nearest land. You are to fly at once to it—you can do it as an endurance test if you must. When you see the war vessel, relieve one another while you both strip to the skin and pitch your clothes overboard. Then drop the book into the sea—to be sure it sinks and does not float with the plane. Come down in the water. Hang on to your plane as long as you can, and souse every part of your bodies, particularly your hands. If you can't manage a thorough job that way, don't let the sailors lug you aboard till you are exhausted. Get them to tow you for an hour or more. Your plane is to be blown to bits and sent to the bottom. General Maitland will give all the necessary orders if you tell him what you have seen and say that I back my advice with my scientific reputation. I gave him one straight steer; this is a straighter. Tell him that, and tell him that the Russian agents beat us to our objective.

"Finally, he is to cable at once to the United States for the ten best geological chemists in the country. The National

Scientific Council will select them and send them at once if he gives my name and says it is to avert a world disaster. In the meantime he is to send me all the chemists and geologists he can collect in China and rush them here by air. He must communicate with me daily by air until the danger is past—if it ever is. Now, beat the record back to Shanghai!"

Ten hours later Kansu had stopped shaking, except spasmodically, and the shattered mountains had apparently flowed their limit. The marines, officers and men, slept the sleep of exhaustion in a large plantation of stunted firs, whose fallen needles made the ideal bed for weary bones. Saxby alone kept watch, although there was no necessity for him to do so, as there was not a hostile human being within miles. After a short foraging expedition through the ruined and deserted farms to salvage dead pigs, hens and cattle for their supper, the marines turned in to the last man. Even the captain could not have kept his eyes open to see the greatest bombardment in history. Saxby volunteered to act as sentry and they accepted. He wished to keep his eye on the expiring earthquake. The characteristic odor of decay that had followed them all day while the sun was up had gradually dissipated. Saxby felt, however, that the danger was not yet past.

Events so far had confirmed his theory in the main, although modifying it in some details. The thing, or more accurately one of the things, that destroyed Markoff was evidently a cellulose feeder. The transformation of Yang's notebook from woodpulp paper to rock crystal threw a flood of light on the habits of at least one species of the living crystals. Anxious to observe further evidence in support of his theory Saxby could not have slept had he tried. His lonely vigil was no hardship, especially as the intense, unnatural cold forewarned him that nature had not yet done her utmost.

Just as the night began to grow interesting from a scien-

tific point of view for Saxby, it developed, hundreds of miles away, an unexpected human interest for the aviators. It was now about half an hour before midnight. The mechanician was taking his turn flying while the pilot slept. At the moment they were speeding eastward less than a hundred and fifty miles from Shanghai, and were some two thousand feet above the bloodiest battlefield of the Chinese revolution. So stubborn and sanguinary had been that long-drawn-out butchery, that its aura tainted the air about the plane to the point of nausea and woke the pilot. It is unpleasant to have to record such facts, but they are essential to an understanding of nature's attack; moreover they are a part of our common heritage from war that was to end war, and there is no good reason for strewing roses on human stupidity or sophisticating it under a yellow or a red flag. Both the pilot and the mechanician became violently ill.

"Here's where I quit the service," the mechanician remarked, trying hard to swallow his disgust. "You saw the last war; I didn't. You're hardboiled; I've still got a stomach. Watch me cash in and get out when we get to Shanghai."

"It won't be much longer now—less than two hours. You'll recover after you've had a bath."

"In salt water. Yes, like hell I'll recover. I don't give a damn if I drown. Say, do dead Christians smell like dead Chinks?"

"Worse. Cheer up, we'll soon be there."

On the moonlit battlefield beneath them all was quiet—from a military point of view—with a ghastly serenity that mocked the dead and jeered at the living who were yet to slaughter and be slaughtered. China at last had awakened from her sleep of two thousand years; she was westernized, civilized, and this portion of her at least smelled like it.

The false peace of the night was not due to any formal armistice, but to one of those tense lulls that sometimes supervene in times of madness when, by tacit consent, the opposing armies stop fighting one another to fight their common enemy before

she can steal a march on them all and impartially obliterate friend and foe alike. If there is one thing that Asiatic soldiers dread worse than death, dysentery or the devil, it is the bubonic plague. The medical corps of neither army would as yet admit an indisputable case of death by plague, but both acknowledged an alarming number that looked suspiciously like the real thing.

Neither side had fired a shot for the past thirty-six hours; both were engaged in burying their dead as fast as they could scratch the shallow ditches in the rocky soil. Mere burial in this case was insufficient. The transports of both armies were straining every nerve to rush vast quantities of quicklime and disinfectants from the cities to the battlefield. The congested roads, the wretched inefficiency of the transport service, and the keen competition for the fast diminishing supplies of sanitary materials all indicated an overwhelming victory for nature in the immediate future. The faster the diggers worked the more they had to do, and no man could say that he would finish his particular bit before the grinding cramp seized him by the middle and tumbled him headlong into his half-completed job.

Naturally the nerves of both armies were on edge. The least hint of a check in its necessary work might well send either army into a Chinese berserker rage and incidentally end the revolution in its favor. The side that fired the first shot would probably get it in the neck; the victors might celebrate by infecting the entire civilian population.

The course of the bombing plane lay directly over the main defenses of the army holding the southern edge of the battlefield. Both armies were thoroughly westernized. They had all the approved weapons, and lots of them, including machine-guns, flame-throwers, gas, tear and smoke bombs, field artillery of the latest French pattern, American and European airplanes, trench mortars, jets, and anti-aircraft guns. In fact, their equipment would have been a credit to any nation on earth, for they had bought it with their own money, a treasure at a time, from most of the nations on earth. The cheaper truck, such as rifles

and shells, they manufactured themselves under the expert direction of western technicians. They were quite proud, poor devils, of their aptitude.

The combination of a bombing plane in the moonlight and a general on the verge of hysteria made a highly explosive mixture. The general quickly verified the fact that no plane on his own side was aloft that night. He did not act in haste. Although he felt morally certain that his side was playing the game straight, he took pains to ascertain the truth by telephone. Since it was not one of his own birds, it must be one of his rival's. Practical soldier though he was, he cursed his enemies for a pack of inhuman blackguards, technically within their rights as laid down by the laws of civilized warfare, but beyond the pale of human decency in their sneaking disregard of an unwritten agreement. He personally telephoned to the anti-aircraft batteries to open fire.

"What the hell!" the mechanician shouted as the first shell burst like a white mushroom in the moonlight.

"What the hell" was right. The second shot brought them down—two thousand feet. Perhaps it was lucky in more ways than one. If the second shot hadn't got them the two hundredth would. They escaped the suspense.

The plane crashed directly astraddle of a long, shallow ditch packed like a box of sardines with the victims of a sudden sickness. The loose gravel had not yet been thrown over them, but the quicklime had. As the fuselage of the plane burst, the fragments of Yang's petrified notebook shot out and buried themselves in the quicklime. The bodies of the aviators followed.

The burial squad removed what they could of the plane and mechanically went on with their work, shoveling gravel.

An officer inspected the wreck. It was not worth salvaging. He abandoned it and finally ordered his squad of shovel men to get to work on the next ditch.

The general's nerves had snapped. His Oriental calm vanished in a blazing, occidental, homicidal fury. The field batteries

were ordered to lay down a barrage to prepare the way for an infantry attack by moonlight. From a military point of view it was sheer insanity; but the general was beyond reason. Burial parties broke up and raced to join their companies. Thinking like the general that they had been spied upon by the enemy as a preliminary to a night attack, they seized their rifles and machine-guns with a will, inspired, as they were, by a sort of courage of panicky desperation.

The first salvo of the barrage roused the opposing army to the pitch of madness. Their nerves too had snapped. The officers had difficulty in holding the infuriated men back. They did not wait to be attacked. With fixed bayonets they plunged forward to burst through the red curtains of the barrage and attack.

Half of them never reached their objective. The other half, however, made up in spirit what they had lost in their number.

The field gunners of the attacked saw them coming, became confused, shortened the range, and drummed a devil's tattoo upon their own front-line trenches. The maddest battle in the history of the Orient was on. There was no doubt about that.

It raged twenty hours—all that night and all the next day till eight o'clock in the evening, when the full moon rose on a shambles that was silent, save for the cries of the wounded, only because both armies had run out of ammunition. Exploding dumps, deliberately touched off by the Russian advisors of the Chinese in more than one instance, had hastened the end. The Russian agents were strictly impartial. They did what lay to their hands, whether it benefited friend or foe. As in diplomacy, so in war; to double-cross is to win the day—for yourself, if not for your allies. From the red point of view the melee had proved a glorious victory; from the Chinese it was a draw. Both armies were out of the war for good. They had ceased to exist as armies; their remains would be absorbed into less butchered organizations. By that much the communists were nearer their goal of an Asia regenerated by the new faith.

Every yard of the battlefield had been trampled over fifty or a hundred times by the frenzied combatants. If indeed the ground was infected the plague was now thoroughly disseminated. Nature, however, did not have to rely upon a mere plague of buboes, of swelling lymphatic glands, to demonstrate her superiority in the art of war. She chose a weapon almost infinitely older than the most ancient disease germ.

The sword she grasped was forged in geologic time, ages before organic life began, and she had not forgotten in all that time how to use it.

The general whose order had initiated the madness lay moaning on the loose gravel, mortally wounded. Like a captain of old he had lost his head in the heat of battle and had risked his own life to rally his wavering troops.

Under his personal leadership the battered army had pulled itself together for a last supreme assault that swept the enemy from his feet—for half an hour.

Then the tide turned and the dead of the enemy were duly avenged.

Again and again that fluctuating tide took up the quarrel, first of one side, then of the other, with the foe of the moment, in order that its temporary friend might sleep in peace on fields too barren to support a white poppy.

The dead of both sides slept soundly, too weary to dream that the victorious fortune that avenged them was a deceiving harlot.

As the dying general's eyes clouded he had a strange vision of death. From the bloody charnel before his eyes he saw a transparent sword shoot into the moonlight and glitter icily as if crusted with diamonds. The sword seemed to live; flickering bands of purple and green light pulsed along its axis in the substance of the crystal, and myriads of spicules, bright as sparks of electricity, budded along its brittle edges. Suddenly two arms, like those of a cross, shot from the sword a third of the way down from the tip and began to grow. The vision may have

comforted the dying man, for he was a convert of the missionaries. It is possible that he closed his eyes in peace on a symbol of mercy conquering the world.

If he did so, he died happy, for what he saw was Markoff rising from the dead.

A wounded infantryman by the general's side also saw nature's apparent miracle and tried to crawl away. The grave where the sword grew burst and hurled the wounded man free. Screaming with terror he clapped his hands over his stomach and fled. He had seen the enemy.

He stumbled over the propeller of an airplane, picked himself up and ran with the rest. All had seen it now.

Those who had legs ran.

13

CONFLICT

WHILE SAXBY WATCHED, AND UNDER THE same bright moonlight the maddened Chinese were annihilating one another hundreds of miles away, the marines slept. But they did not rest. The unnatural cold chilled them to the bone, and a specific poison, odorless as clean air, tainted the night. They began to toss and groan in their sleep, unable to shake off the dreams that defied reason and yet were more credible than any human experience.

"I had better waken them," Saxby muttered to himself. "They are having the same dream that I had the night Yang died. Gad! I begin to feel it myself. Something's going to happen; I can feel it coming, and I think it is coming pretty soon."

He tried to move and discovered that he could not. He seemed to be paralyzed.

"Something new," he remarked. "Well, let it come. I can't stop it."

Unable to move a muscle he sat staring straight ahead over the moonlit desolation of the shattered mountains. To test the strange paralysis he tried to shout, only to find he had lost control of his throat. The automatic functions of his body continued normally. His heart did not lose a beat, he breathed regularly, and he saw and heard as clearly as ever. Then he

became aware that his hands and feet were losing all sensation. The numbness rapidly spread over his whole body, and he sat as rigid as a rock, without sensation, yet fully conscious of what he saw.

His condition was precisely that of a patient submitting to a surgical operation under one of the newer wonderfully effective local anaesthetics.

Naturally he wondered what the nature of the operation was to be.

It began with a tremendous roaring swish like the simultaneous ascent of thousands of gigantic skyrockets. The wilderness of shattered rock that had overflowed the plain for a distance of fifteen miles or more began to boil. Its surface rose and fell tumultuously in huge bubbles of rock and earth that puffed up suddenly, burst, and collapsed with a brittle din that shook the sky.

This phase lasted but a few seconds.

First one bubble survived, then another, until the whole desolation became a city of bleak, colossal domes. The domes began to glitter icily in the moonlight, and almost instantly the imprisoned life that was in them burst forth and multiplied. Jostling one another to ruin, the furiously increasing masses of crystal flashed out gleaming arms that branched and begot new colonies of glittering crystal; these fed for a moment on their generative substance, then instantly burst out in explosive growth in all directions, repeating the conquest of space. As yet they had no mode of locomotion; their sole power over distance was growth. In their urgency to survive, the opposing masses shot their gleaming progeny at one another, devouring the diminishing distances between them.

Their one instinct, if they had any, was to exterminate their competitors by seizing and absorbing all of the food by which they might increase.

Before the last alley closed and became a dense mass of furiously growing crystals like the rest, the mountain range that

had flowed over the plain was a vast concourse of gigantic crystal shapes, towering and flashing in the moonlight, that shot upward with an accelerated growth that menaced the sky. Each glittering pinnacle budded at a thousand sparkling points into living spears of crystal; these shot into the night, themselves to become the sources of explosive life. Neither upward nor lateral growth apparently had any natural limit, and the huger the vast bulks became the faster they grew. The whole mass pulsed and flickered with striae of green and purple light deep within the hollow crystal horde, and from the brittle, spearlike points streamed steadily upward innumerable brushes of clear, cold blue light. The loftiest pinnacles, leaping skyward with an ever greater speed, bristled with electricity whose sharp, dry hiss all but drowned in volume the creeping rustle of an incessant growth.

With a succession of pealing clashes of crystal masses the last lanes closed and instantly became new foci of fecundity. For perhaps a second the densely packed mass withstood the internal pressure of its own lateral expansion. Then with a transcendent crash thousands of irregular chasms were instantly created, radiating in all directions through the still growing mass, as the hollow crystals collapsed along the planes of greatest pressure.

As the crushed crystals released the purple and green luminescence which was the source of their life, they instantly lost their solid structure and sublimated into a heavy, invisible gas. Where one crystal volatilized, the impact of its destruction set free the imprisoned energy to shatter the densely packed crystal matrix in which it was embedded; the wave of destruction thus started stopped only at the densest cores, isolating them as prolific centers of unabated vitality.

Again the merciless contest for possession of the nutritive rocks was fought out, but with diminishing speed, and again the resultant deadlock was suddenly broken by waves of destruction that cleft the solid unit into thousands of isolated enemies. The terrific speed of the encounters became less as the nutrition in the rocks was drawn into successive generations, to be dissipated

into gas as enemy clashed against enemy, till, after the hundredth assault the lanes ceased to close, and the towering victors grew slowly and silently upward, starving on their exhausted rocks. The food they had battled for no longer existed. Ten thousand conquerors towered in the moonlight to await the trivial accidents that would destroy them as they had destroyed their enemies.

The whole conflict lasted but an incredibly short time as men measure events. From the instant when the first gleaming spire rose from the rocks to the last clash but thirty or forty seconds had elapsed. Yet every detail of it was fixed distinctly and indelibly on the consciousness of the one human being who saw it all from beginning to end.

Saxby would have closed his eyes and stopped his ears if he could, but he had lost control of his body. By a sense more ancient than either sight or hearing he experienced a torture less endurable than either the sights or the sounds of that conflict between things which lived, and yet were neither animal nor plant, for the cells of his whole body were aware of the combatants' agony as parts of their substance died.

Each wave of destruction that cleft the warring masses asunder rocked the very atoms of his own flesh and bone with a pang that was not mortal pain, but the after-shock of an immemorial dissolution. The stuff of his own body had suffered in forgotten ages as those things were suffering now; before the first life started on the millions of years of upward evolution that had culminated in his own body and in his mind, the substances of his body had lived as these things were living, and had died in agony such as theirs.

It was not a dream. The men who slept, drugged by the same poison as he, also experienced it. Nature does not communicate with its creatures by reason alone, nor through the haze of ideas that reason evolves to explain nature, for it is insensible to reason, but directly, thing to thing. Because we have existed, thought and reasoned for at most a few million years—which are less than a pulse beat in the life of the stuff

of which we are made—we assume that nature has but one mode of expression and but one way of communicating with its creatures. When the last man has ceased to think, the universe will still be evolving as if our race had never existed, and possibly the shadow of our own passing may fall upon the life that is to follow us, chilling our successors with the memory of a pain that only their atoms remember. May no accident precipitate us into their age as the living crystals were hurled into our own. With all their insensate ferocity, according to the lonely watcher who saw their war and who suffered in their death, those crystals were less terrible than some whose nostrils are filled with the breath of life.

The discharge of millions of volts of electricity from the warring crystals, and the escape of vast quantities of ionized gases as the dying bled out their purple or green lifeblood, incurred its inevitable reaction. Even as the clashing titans warred, grinding themselves and their opposing kind to dust that sublimated instantly, the suspended moisture of the chilly air condensed into black thunder clouds above their splintering pinnacles.

When the conflict ended, and the victors towered up in solitary might awaiting starvation and the dawn, a vast canopy, black as anger, sagged down from the sky above them, shutting them from the moonlight and penning them up in all but total darkness. All about their sombre isolation a soft radiance flooded the plain, and it became the dream, the unsubstantial vision of an infinite ocean from another life; the black island of the titans awaiting the lightning was the reality, the substance, and the familiar dwelling place. The lucent calm, glowing like a milky opal above the black cliffs at the base of the island, and receding with diminishing brilliance to infinity, was the incredible memory; the stark island, the vivid present.

The sooty shadow, under that black canopy instinct with lightning, was the natural habitat and fecund breeding place of the living crystals that had bred and multiplied in sunless caverns

to burst asunder the mountains; in total darkness they increased without restraint; in sunlight they ceased to multiply. Injured in darkness they still lived; the most trivial wound inflicted in full daylight slew them progressively and swiftly from pinnacle to root. In one last effort to increase in their fostering darkness, the living crystals drew from the impoverished rocks the last traces of their silicon, absorbed and digested it into the compounds that gave them life, grew explosively for a fraction of a second, and ceased absolutely to grow. Unless transplanted to fresh feeding grounds the ravenous titans must stand where they were rooted, and starve till the accident of a thrown missile should break a fragment from the brittle armor of one, releasing the prisoned life and letting the famished thing perish utterly.

The black island leaped into stark relief as the lightning struck the highest pinnacle, demolished it, and sent the towering crystal crashing down in a wave of progressive ruin to fragments that volatilized instantly. The following crash of thunder, sharp as a pistol shot, was the signal for the sagging canopy to release all of its forked darts. Under the volleying thunders that jarred the plain like a rapid earthquake, the stabbing lightnings etched every glittering detail of the motionless titans in glaring relief, playing harmlessly about a group of fifty or a hundred, only to leap suddenly away and strike down a solitary martyr. As a colossal crystal expired, the man watching its extinction suffered its infinite pain, and the sleepers dreamed of its agony with every atom of their bodies. The vast army of the victorious crystals that had survived by annihilating their kind dwindled rapidly to half its numbers, then to a quarter, and then more slowly, till but a scant dozen of titans stood where they had grown, powerless to flee, awaiting their doom. A single spurt of blue fire from above destroyed all but three; the clouds burst, and with a roar that might have been heard fifty miles let down their deluge.

The three survivors toppled slowly over on the dissolving earth and came gently to rest on their sides in the flood, expos-

ing their matted roots of crystal to the rain.

The lightnings did not cease with the coming of the rain, but continued to strike viciously at the last of their fallen enemies. In falling the three had exposed their secret places, the very hearts and fountains of their life. Through the crystal curtains of the rain it was not possible to see precisely what happened to the exposed roots about which the lightnings concentrated their attack; yet the quality of the flickering light which they emitted changed visibly. It was in the roots that the purple and green light, the lifeblood of the living crystals, first generated as the monsters grew. Passing into the hollow crystals that budded from the roots, the light gave life to the branching mass, and carried with it the principle of life and generation to the farthest tips. As the glancing lightnings played all about the roots the quality of the light underwent a gradual change. The purple separated from the green and darted through the limbs of the recumbent masses, while the green, its brilliance intensified, remained in the roots. As if repelled by the green, the lightnings followed the purple, stabbing viciously. Simultaneously the recumbent purple branches of all three were struck. The stricken branches withered instantly, and the same bolts which destroyed them fused the ends of the huge stumps, sealing up the green light in the roots. The lightnings ceased, and a pall of darkness descended with the flood. Through the black torrent three misty green embers glowed and flickered evilly, waiting the accidental missile which would liberate their prisoned life to ravage the world.

A sleeping man stirred in his dream and groaned. Saxby felt sensation steal into his nerves once more. The man who had groaned staggered to his feet in six inches of water, cursed, and shouted to rouse his companions before they drowned.

"What a hellish night!" It was the captain's voice. "Where's Mr. Saxby?"

"Here. I'm beginning to move again."

"Why the devil didn't you waken us?"

"I couldn't. You were drugged into paralysis. So was I. But I saw everything."

"I dreamed it," a man muttered. "Why can't I move my legs?"

"Gassed," Saxby informed him. "Lie still. You'll find your legs in a minute. This downpour is dissolving the poison like salt and soaking it into the ground."

"There will be a flood if this keeps up another ten minutes," Lane remarked. "Give us a hand in rousing the men. We must move higher up the slope at once."

It was a half an hour before they were on the march uphill, slushing through a torrent of gravel and muddy water that almost swept them from their feet. At length they reached a place of safety and stood about miserably in the dark and the rain waiting for daylight.

On comparing notes Saxby and Lane found a remarkable similarity between their awareness of pain during the battle of the living crystals, although one had been stupefied in sleep and the other intensely awake. Questioning his men Lane found that they, too, had distinct recollections of the same thing, although only three or four had the skill to express graphically what they had "dreamed." On being assured by Saxby that the rain was disposing of the poisonous gas for good, the men brightened. The downpour continued to within an hour of daybreak.

The sun rose red upon a welter of white mud—the sticky paste of crushed rock from which every particle of silicon compounds had been absorbed by the living crystals. Most of this stuff was pulverized limestone. The living crystals, it appeared, needed only a small amount of lime or other calcium compounds to start their explosive growth; their food, so far as they obtained it from rocks, was silicon dioxide. From the fate of Tom's cotton mat and Yang's woodpulp notebook, it was clear, as Saxby had already deduced, that some at least of the crystals could draw nourishment from cellulose. An equally probable theory suggested was that at some stage of their development

the crystals in which both the purple and the green luminescence played the part of blood or chlorophyll, could live and multiply on both kinds of food, silicon and cellulose, but that they preferred silicon and thrived best on it. In fact some of the phenomena indicated that these dual monsters could absorb only a limited amount of cellulose, no matter how huge they became. When the lightning which must have been electricity of some kind, positive or negative, played about the roots of the three survivors, it repelled the oppositely electrified gas, the green, into the roots and pursued the purple into the farthest tips before striking the branches of hollow crystal and sealing off the green in the roots. Such was Saxby's tentative explanation to Lane as they stood staring out over the mass of white mud that buried the ruins of Teng-shan. The deluge had one good feature; it had effectively sluiced the earthquake fissures full of gravel from the undestroyed hills.

The men gathered in silent knots viewing the three enormous roots, towering up in the cold morning air, like the wrecks of colossal icebergs, which were all that remained of the vast forest of monsters that perished in the night. Saxby was uneasy.

"I can't understand," he said, "why those infernal things don't melt into gas as the sun strikes them. They must be a new breed."

"Let's walk—or swim—over and take a look," Lane suggested.

"Not yet. Give the sun an hour. If they're not dead then, I'll go with you. What about sending the men off on a foraging expedition in these hills? There must be dead pigs or chickens in the ruins of the farm. I'm starving."

"So am I. We shall have to get over the pass into Shen-si today. I'll send the men off to see what they can do."

"That's the stuff. Tell them to bring back a cow or something for me. I've got to stay and see the end of this."

When, at the end of an hour, the three bergs of crystal showed no sign of melting in the hot sunshine, Lane and Saxby

made their way down to the white, sticky, steaming mess. As they slipped and floundered through the mire stretching for miles between them and their goal they regretted their early start. The deluge had washed the lethal gas of the crystals' destruction from the air thoroughly enough, but the stuff still poisoned the soil. Under the sun's rays it was now decomposing in the paste which it impregnated. Every step released a sickening puff of the repulsive gas. Although it was not definitely poisonous in this advanced state of decay, its indescribable odor was all but unendurable. Only an insatiable curiosity on Saxby's part held Lane to his intention.

Presently splintered timbers, fragments of copper water-spouts, and the remains of three machine guns sticking up from the mire, announced that they were walking over the churned-up ruins of the governor's palace. They were now rapidly nearing the smallest of the crystal "bergs." Saxby walked warily ahead, glancing sharply from side to side.

"I say," he called back, "do you notice anything?"

Lane, trained as a soldier to observe the minutest details of the enemy's territory, replied that he did. The metal scraps were more plentiful than ever, and two twisted copper spouts showed that they were still walking over the ruins of important buildings. There was, however, a total and suspicious absence of wood. Not a splinter was to be found.

"Evidently that green devil squatting there like a tame iceberg is a cellulose feeder," Saxby remarked.

"Squatting" was rather a contemptuous term to apply to the huge shape that towered above them like a skyscraper, shadowing the mire with its distorted limbs of hollow crystal for a radius of a quarter of a mile. Through the vast bulk of its main mass, and along the jagged "roots" that sprawled in all directions, a dull green light pulsed slowly as if the creature had a living heart. Watching it in awed silence the men almost heard the steady beat of the life flowing and ebbing through the crystal arteries of the thing. They could not doubt that it lived.

Saxby broke the silence.

"After last night nothing surprises me. Yet this beats them all. You can see it live, or rather you can see it starving to death. There's not a stick of wood or any other cellulose material within half a mile of the infernal brute, and that, I'll wager, is the only sort of stuff it can absorb. It must be a cellulose feeder. What would happen, do you suppose, if I were to go back and get one of those posts and offer it to the brute?"

"You might try it and see," Lane suggested. "I'll wait here."

Saxby was as good as his challenge. He started back to get a stick of wood. Lane stopped him.

"Don't be a fool! You haven't the ghost of an idea how that green devil eats its food when it gets the chance. We saw how the purple and green got at Markoff's bones. Once is enough."

"All right," Saxby laughed. "I'll have to wait till you're gone. Shall we go up and take a look at him at close quarters? I want to see how brittle he is."

"I'm game." He suddenly remembered what had happened to Tom's mat. "Take off your clothes," he ordered, proceeding to set the example.

"What the devil for?" Saxby demanded.

"You say it is a cellulose feeder. There's a lot of cotton in our clothes. I have a wife and kid in Los Angeles. Want any more reasons?"

Under protest Saxby stripped to the skin. Lane would not even permit him to put his shoes on to protect his bare feet.

"The fact that Markoff's boots and nails were not destroyed doesn't prove anything," he objected. "Nor does the fact that the hoofs of the burros came through unchanged have anything to do with us. Neither you nor I ever saw an all-green brute like this. Ours all had a dash of purple. This fellow may relish leather and horn and stuff like that as much as Markoff's seemed to enjoy bones and cotton. You make your inspection in a state

of nature or you don't make it."

Grumbling at Lane's "militarism," Saxby submitted. Naked as worms the two men passed into the cold shadow of the colossus. Though neither admitted it till long afterwards, both were so stiff with fright that they had difficulty in making their legs move. Had either been alone he would never have dreamed of going forward. Afraid of acting the poltroon before his companion, each made a fool of himself, for it was nothing less than ignorant bravado to tempt the devil of whose habits they knew precisely nothing, except that they were probably evil.

On close inspection the towering buttresses of the creature appeared as nothing more ominous than huge, hollow crystals, packed solidly together, and filled with a moving green light. The whole structure gave an impression of massive strength, and somehow, for the feeling it induced was undefinable, a sullen threat of immense stores of creative energy locked up within the crystal cavities.

"I wonder how brittle this rock crystal is?" Saxby speculated. He glanced up at the tremendous root three hundred feet above them, zig-zagging far out over the site of Teng-shan like a forked dart of green lightning. "If that thing up there should break away now and fall on us, we should be cut to ribbons before we could yell. Feel how sharp these edges are where the crystals twin. Damn it! I've cut my finger."

"Don't do that!" the captain yelled.

Before Lane could stop him, Saxby had dealt the crystal wall a resounding blow. The hollow crystal vibrated, emitting a deep, bell-like note that was inexpressibly mournful. The sound died away in the vitals of the thing and the wall ceased to shudder.

"You could almost imagine the brute had nerves," Saxby remarked. "But, of course, that's rot."

"What did you hit it for?" Lane expostulated, his own nerves on edge.

"To get some idea of its elasticity. I wanted to find out

what are the chances of killing it with a judiciously thrown stone. From the way the crystal vibrates I infer that it is extremely brittle." He looked up at the hanging root. "Before the breeze grows into a full-sized wind and snaps that thing off, I think we had better retreat. I don't like the way the gusts eddy about the base of this berg."

As they put on their sodden clothes they held a council of war.

"These infernal things have got to be destroyed before you leave," Saxby declared. "There's no telling what a sudden storm may blow up. These are cellulose feeders, pure and simple. I'm convinced of that. Suppose there is another storm and a high wind. Those roots will be blown down and smashed into millions of bits. They are exceedingly brittle. When they do smash, they will go all to pieces, and vast quantities of pulverized glass will blow all over western China. What if some of that dust settles on a forest, or even on a grove like the one we camped in last night? Although I am not sure of my deduction, I believe that it is certain that something bad would start.

"With abundant nourishment the germs of life in the dust might well generate a plague of the huge brutes that would sweep the world and denude it of all growing things—trees, grass, shrubs and all. We saw how the silicon feeders stop growing when they have exhausted their food. They can't budge an inch, except by growing laterally, from the place where they take root. The slightest impact jars them to pieces; the breaking of the brittle crystals starts a physical reaction that dissolves the solids instantly into heavy gases. Then, when the sun rises, it finishes the killing by decomposing the gases into lighter, unstable ones that are perfectly harmless, apparently, and don't seem to retain their composition long. That they smell like the very devil while they are disintegrating is merely an unpleasant detail of no significance. Now, I vote that we act on these obvious hints and try our luck against these three green devils before you leave. I've got to stay here till General Maitland sends

me some word and a geologist or two."

After much argument Lane finally agreed. The point which decided him was not made by Saxby. That intrepid collector of earthquakes thought nothing of his personal danger. He never even mentioned it. Lane simply could not leave him, even with a squad or two for protection, to his own devices. To do so would expose him and his insatiable curiosity to almost certain destruction, for Saxby would never be content, with Lane out of the way, until he had explored every crystal of those evil bergs. With the devils destroyed before he left with the main body of his men, as he must do owing to the scarcity of food, Lane felt that Saxby might safely stay a year in Kansu if he liked, and enjoy himself after his own fashion. The decision was a human one. It offered, perhaps, the only solution of a difficult problem. Neither could foresee what would happen. The only way to find out was to experiment, which they did.

"There can't be any danger," Saxby repeated. "These brutes have consumed every stick of wood within reach. They were the outposts of the army that destroyed itself last night. What can they live on if we smash them where they stand? Nothing. They'll die, half an hour after we let their blood out. But destruction in a high wind would be another matter. At least some of the spores—if you can call them that—would blow into trees before they were dead. To make everything safe for the future, you can collect an army of Chinese in Shen-si and bring them back with you to bury all the fragments under six feet of this paste. There's not an atom of silicon or a splinter of wood in it, so the disease will be buried forever. Here's where we get the better of nature. Our kind of evolution shall survive, not her antique brand that would make the silicon compounds masters, and the carbon compounds—ourselves among the rest—slaves and food for these brainless abominations."

The battle of "carbon against silicon," as Saxby called the assault of the human beings against their primeval rivals, began at twelve o'clock sharp. On returning to the camp in the fir

grove, Saxby and the captain found the men roasting the sad remains of half a dozen fowls, nine pigs, and two marmots—all victims of the earthquake. The ration was inadequate for the ravenous men, but it would eke out what they carried in their knapsacks and make a forced march into Shen-si possible.

Believing in safety first, Lane organized the attack against the smallest of the crystal bergs—the one he and Saxby had inspected. If they conquered that one they would proceed to demolish its two gigantic brothers. The baby was not much taller than the tallest New York skyscraper; its brothers made it look like a pigmy.

At a quarter to twelve the marines lined up just opposite the zone which the voracious infant had licked clean of the last splinter of wood. The jagged projection shadowing the plain, three hundred feet from the ground, under which Lane and Saxby had conducted their investigation, was selected as the most vulnerable point. If that forked streak of crystal lightning could be severed at its base, it would crash against the main body in its fall and probably bring the whole huge berg crashing down in shattered crystal. Such was the mechanical theory of the attack. By chipping off chunks of the jagged root at the highest point of its thickest part, where it branched from the exposed core, the desired end would follow with eclat. It was as easy, the sergeant asserted, as shooting fish with dynamite. The captain's voice rang out.

"Are you ready? Fire!"

Most of the steel-nosed bullets made clean hits. A shower of crystal chips leaped into the sunlight; the brittle support cracked, and very slowly for a fraction of a second the huge root began to wheel inward toward the main mass. Then, with a terrific impact it struck the crystal berg at its weakest part, and the whole cracked asunder and began collapsing in a thousand cascades of glittering crystal.

The men's cheers were lost in the brittle thunder that filled the sky. So also was Saxby's warning shout. Unable to make

himself heard he ploughed through the puddles and sticky mud and grasped the sergeant by the arm. By signs he conveyed his warning and the sergeant passed it on. It was a slow process, as the men were reluctant to turn their backs on a spectacle that beat a hundred Niagaras.

What sent the cold shivers up Saxby's back was this. He noticed as the green gas escaped from the broken crystals that it flowed down, not up. Moreover, as the sunlight played upon the gas it rapidly bleached. The hollow crystals evidently were filters for the actinic rays of the sun. Now that the sunlight played directly upon the gas, chemical changes set in, transforming it into a colorless compound. Was the new gas as heavy as the old? Was it heavier than air? If so, it would continue to stream downward, invisibly, and pile up for a moment as it fell about the crumbling base of the berg. Then, when the whole berg collapsed, the wind of its fall would shoot the colorless gas out over the plain in a huge, ever-expanding vortex. If the gas was poisonous the shattered berg would be avenged on the men who had destroyed it.

It was every man for himself. Saxby and the captain found themselves floundering in white mud up to their knees. They had stumbled into a shallow earthquake fissure which the deluge had filled with sticky slime. The premonitory puff of air, being shoved forward in a huge wave before the oncoming gas, knocked them flat on their faces in the white mess and ducked them completely. Saxby stuck his head up, wiped his eyes as best he could, and saw the captain's head just reappearing. He also saw a rabble of men trying to run. They were having about as much success as flies on fly-paper, but they had made progress. They were now bogged in one of the worst places where splintered timbers from the governor's palace protruded through the mire. Saxby found his attention riveted by one stout post, evidently part of a roof beam, which stuck up in solitary desolation between the men and the shattered berg. It was covered with a glittering crust of large scales which looked like bright green

barnacles, but which were in fact young living crystals. Saxby grabbed Lane's arms and pulled them under the slime.

"Keep under, except enough to breathe with," he shouted. "It's coming!"

Lane did not see it come, as he was unable to wipe the white paste off his eyelids. Saxby did, and he regretted his ability to see. Yet he could not have closed his eyes; horror forced them open. First he saw the fur of green crystals on the post add a second coat on top of the first. What happened, of course, was that the first coat was thrust out from the decomposing wood by a more vigorous growth of crystals that absorbed the first as they grew. He remembered a third coat being laid on in a fraction of a second. Then instantly the mass attained the maximum growth and exploded into a motionless dome of green crystal, bristling like a mace, forty feet in diameter. The entire substance of the post had been devoured by the monster. Its hollow crystal cells, thin as paper yet strong as granite, were the offspring of an invisible gas breeding on the cellulose of the wood. In its explosion to maturity the brute cut one bogged man to pieces with its razor-edged knives of crystal.

What happened next was repeated until the shattered berg had achieved a complete and barren victory over its destroyers. One man, bogged to his boots in the white paste, suddenly disappeared. The invisible gas flowing over the quagmire had isolated him like an island in hell. Instantly the life in the gas seized upon the cotton in his uniform, devoured it, and burst into a living crystal that reached its maturity in less than a second and ceased to grow. A pillar of densely packed green crystals, ten feet in diameter and six feet high, squatted in the mire where, less than a second since, a living man had stood. The white of his naked body gleamed mistily at the core of his living tomb.

In less than ten seconds the last man was dead. The victors, except the two cowering in the mudhole, were wiped out by the fiend they had conquered. Some fell victims to the knives of

the living crystals, that burst from every stick or splinter, before the gas overtook them a second or two later and crystallized their clothes, but most were entombed as was the first. That these men had come to Kansu on a mission of mercy counted for nothing with nature, whose motto seemed to be, "Who taketh the sword shall fall by the sword."

The two survivors did not dare to venture from their mud-hole till sunset. When at last Saxby decided to risk it, he managed to tear off a piece of his cotton undershirt without getting it completely smeared with white paste. This was brought to the surface in his clenched fist and hastily dropped. It was not attacked. The men crawled out of the mess that had saved their lives and reeled off toward the pass into Shen-si.

"I must report as soon as possible to General Maitland," Lane muttered. "We can do nothing here."

"No," Saxby agreed. "We made a ghastly mistake. We shall have to get back somehow to Shanghai and return with the proper weapons for destroying these infernal things."

"How can they be destroyed? Your last guess was a bad one."

"After what has happened I won't insult you by prophesying. Still, I have an idea. Stay here while I go over and look at one of these new brutes. No! Don't you come. Remember you have a family; I haven't."

Saxby's latest idea was a natural outgrowth of his previous theories. His main contentions still survived, although each successive assault of nature modified the details. These new crystals were of a different kind from any of the others. This much was obvious from their habits. They were pure cellulose feeders like the two titans still looming undestroyed above the ruined mountains; but their contours were utterly different from those of the giants. Saxby still maintained that his initial strategy was sound. He had merely blundered in carrying it out. Before firing, the men should have stripped to the skin, and they should have burned every stick of wood in the vicinity of the bergs.

Approaching one of the squat pillars Saxby suffered a mishap which nearly cost him his life. He learned that the living crystals were not quite so immobile as they seemed. Human beings and other animals walk by advancing their feet. The object of lifting the feet and walking is to cover distance, to move from one place to another—in short, not to be chained a prisoner to one spot. It probably has never occurred to most human beings or animals that other natural ways of breaking their bondage to space are available. Yet such an alternative escape without machines is not only feasible but also ridiculously simple. This is exactly what Saxby almost lost his life to discover.

The crystals had devoured every stick of wood in their vicinity that showed so much as a splinter through the protective paste. It was Saxby's misfortune to stumble elaborately over the submerged barrel of a Chinese rifle and kick the stock violently against one of the razor edges of the brute before him.

There is a lot of good solid wood in a rifle stock. The cutting edge of the crystal bit into its prey and instantly began to feed. Saxby was stabbed in the calf of his bare left leg by a green sword that shot from the stock. A difference in aim of a few degrees would have cut his leg off. That was the one accident that befell him; the other crystals shot away from him. Within two seconds the green devil had acquired a huge protuberance on its side that shifted its center of gravity. Then it walked.

Lane came to Saxby's rescue just as the unbalanced brute heaved slowly over in the slime to regain its equilibrium. As they floundered through the sticky mud the thing seemed to pursue them. In whichever way they turned, trying to shake it off, it followed. In horror they began to believe that it had intelligence. But, as they subsequently discovered, it had none. It was merely a blind devil that walked in spite of itself. As its keen swords of crystal swished through the slime they bit into submerged rifle butts and splintered beams. These became new masses of crystal, like tumors on the old, and again shifted the

balance. Occasionally the green brute stood rocking uncertainly for a few minutes, as if undecided which way to roll, when the slight, inevitable fluctuations of the law of chance swerved some crystal knife against a submerged splinter, and immediately the new growth tipped the monster forward. It walked by toppling as it fed and grew irregularly, a pure sport of nature. Where its food chanced to lie plentifully it advanced rapidly; where sustenance was scarce it tottered; with a whole forest but ten feet away it would stand and starve till a chance storm should strew the ground before it with twigs and hurl a broken branch against its terrible knives. Then it and its voracious progeny would devour the forest.

The last hundred yards of their flight was a nightmare. Exhausted by the loss of blood from his wound, Saxby had to be dragged. He begged Lane to leave him, reminding the captain that he had a family. Lane, of course, refused. When at last they reached comparative safety Lane was all in.

"Let's rest a minute," he panted, "and see if we can't stop your leg from bleeding."

While they were binding up the wound with rags torn from their shirts they saw the last of their pursuer. In its wallowing lurch through the mire in search of food it collided with one of the squat, well balanced pillars. The impact shattered both, and their green blood gushed out in the twilight.

"Watch that stuff," Saxby whispered. "If it doesn't lose color and turn white my theory is wrecked."

Almost before he had stopped talking the green gas vanished.

"That settles it!" he exulted. "They're only a species of cellulose-feeders after all. If there were any wood around here now you'd see something."

"What about my clothes?"

"Great Scott! I clean forgot. Beat it, before the stuff spreads. Up on that higher ground!"

They spent the night marooned on a hillock of harder paste.

The first few hours till the moon rose were the hardest. Gazing at the two undestroyed titans that loomed through the fading light, and imagining the worst of the insignificant green devils their own foolhardiness had created, they sat silently dreading what the moonlight might bring forth. Was the malignant fecundity of the ruined mountains indeed exhausted? Were those crystal demons slowly starving where they stood, or were they merely waiting for their generative light to give them strength to march blindly over the plain?

The east brightened; the underside of a fleecy cloud became silver, and the first level rays of the full moon struck the highest pinnacles of the titans. The two men held their breath and waited for the flooding light to bathe the whole infernal brood. The moon cleared the undestroyed hills, and the vast desolation, like a memory from a forgotten life, lay still as death under a cold, unearthly brilliance. Not a vestige of life stirred.

"We had better take no chances," Saxby advised, venting his relief in a prodigious sigh. "If the moonlight isn't strong enough to take the vice out of that hellish gas the sunlight may be."

"It wasn't this afternoon," Lane reminded him. "The men were killed in the blazing sunshine."

"I know," Saxby admitted. "But I believe the stuff can live only a short time in the full sunlight. The men were all killed within five minutes of our crazy attack."

"Yes," Lane argued, "but the gas stopped crystallizing things only because its food ran out. When it died there was not a stick of wood or a rag of cotton above ground. If there had been, the gas would have attacked it in short order."

"That's obvious. And like most obvious things it is obviously only half true. What happened when we crawled out of the mud to inspect? Were our clothes attacked? They were not. That disposes of your pessimism. When I kicked up that damned rifle it came into direct contact with one of the razor edges of the crystal. The crystal was still living—you saw what hap-

pened. It was the living crystal that attacked the wood, not a concealed pocket of undissipated gas. My optimism, as usual, comes out top dog. We shall walk away from here tomorrow morning as sound as a couple of bright new pennies. Then, after we get to Shanghai, we shall come back and lay those devils out for good. Your boys will be avenged. Maitland will give us whatever we ask."

"Much good it will do them," Lane responded bitterly. "They're dead."

"Could they have died better? They were not here to kill and pillage. If they are the means of ending the reign of terror quickly and forever, they will have died like soldiers."

"Do you remember what that Chinese girl told us her grandfather said? 'There shall be no killing.' I wonder if she would extend that order to cover the enemy over there? They are just as much alive as you or I, and if last night is any criterion, they can feel more pain than a woman. Why should we kill them?"

"In order that we may survive. Our kind of evolution is better than theirs."

"Sure?" Lane quizzed.

"Shut up! You're just arguing to keep awake. You think as I do. Nature blundered when she made those brutes. Take it from me, it is not mere chance that gave the carbon compounds a long lead over their competitors—these silicon and cellulose feeders among others—in the race toward evolution and a higher form of life. Whatever we may be we are less fiendish than they are. There must be something more than insane chance behind it all."

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, shut up! How the devil should I know?"

"I think you may have said it," Lane chuckled. "Just one more question. How do you propose to demolish our fellow creatures over there?"

"No bragging till we do it. We may never beat them. Still,

I think there is rather more than a hint in a fine line I remember from one of the poets—who wrote it I forget:

" 'A stone is hurled; the giant falls.' Now, for Heaven's sake shut up and let me try to get some sleep. This has been a hell of a day."

While they slept, dreaming of victory, the enemy marched in triumph over the battlefield, hundreds of miles to the east, which two human enemies had consecrated with their futile bloodshed. Nature was showing those who could still see what war is. It beggared their best.

14

VICTORY

MARKOFF'S RESURRECTION ACCOMPLISHED AT least one good thing. When the survivors on the battlefield saw what was upon them, they temporarily forgot the distinction between ally and enemy. They became merely human beings in a panic to escape.

It chanced that exactly two of the motor trucks that had been hauling quicklime to the battlefield remained intact when the armies ran out of ammunition. The rest were destroyed by inefficient artillery fire and exploding shell dumps. One of these, packed with thirty-five officers and men from both armies, succeeded in getting away. The other was cut to pieces with its cargo, because not one of the soldiers swarming over it knew how to start it. Disregarding the frenzied appeals of the men running after the luckier truck, the officer at the wheel stepped on the gas and headed for Shanghai. He could not possibly have carried another man. Looking back the refugees saw enough to make them yell for more speed. They got it; two of the thirty-five men were jolted overboard. Twenty minutes later the thirty-three in the truck might have boasted that they were the sole survivors of the battle.

One ludicrous incident of that retreat merits immortality. Fifty miles west of Shanghai the thirty-three in the truck began wrangling bitterly over who had won the battle—the army of

General X or the opposing army of General Y. Unfortunately the debate could not be decided by single combat between the generals, as it was General X who saw the first sword of crystal flash from the grave, and General Y was slain by a similar sword while attempting to board the truck which stayed behind. The driver of the lucky truck was a major in the late army of General X. Being an intelligent man he used his eyes—it was moonlight, and he had halted the truck to facilitate debate. He immediately saw a fair way of settling the dispute. As the men had flung away their arms on quitting the field of honor, the major's proposal struck them as being both just and practical. Moreover it was seasoned with a spice of chance, and if there is one thing that a Chinese cannot resist it is a fair opportunity to gamble. They agreed to count noses, or rather uniforms.

The soldiers wearing the uniforms of General X squeezed over to one side of the truck, those of General Y to the other. All agreed to abide by the decision of arithmetic, the losers to become prisoners of the winners. The major, acting as referee, did the counting. There were exactly sixteen on each side, till he cast the deciding vote in favor of General X and won the battle by a majority of one.

The victory was extremely fortunate for the losers as well as the winners, as Shanghai was the great headquarters of the winners' side. It would have been awkward, to say the least, to be forced to take one's prisoners through their own territory. The late General Y's great headquarters were in Manchuria. If it did nothing else, this incident demonstrated the blithe courage of the Chinese soldier in the face of overwhelming natural odds against him. It also earned the major his promotion to the rank of colonel. He had won the battle.

The truck made good time, as the roads had recently been re-ballasted to hasten the transport of disinfectants to the battle-field. At a quarter past four the following morning it delivered its sixteen prisoners of war to the guard at great headquarters. By six o'clock every Chinese in Shanghai was celebrating the

victory. General Y's sixth army, the adherents of General X were informed, had been totally destroyed except for sixteen prisoners. This was, of course, the literal truth—so far as it went.

While Shanghai as a whole celebrated with squealing bands and sputtering firecrackers, the staff officers at Great Headquarters were patiently trying to get at the facts. All thirty-three survivors were being grilled. The one credible detail in their singularly concordant testimony was the story of the bombing plane which precipitated the battle. For the first time the survivors of each side learned that the plane did not belong to their enemies. It was not the property of either General X or General Y. Therefore, the staff officers concluded rather unreasonably, the whole battle was a stupid blunder. The incomprehensible tales of huge crystal devils suddenly leaping out of the ground and racing over the battlefield with swords that slashed like razors, and the equally fantastic accounts of the devils fighting among themselves till they smashed one another to nothing, were dismissed as the fevered fancies of men who had lived for weeks in constant peril of death by gas, flames, bombs, bullets, shells, bayonets and the bubonic plague. The witnesses, protesting like magpies, were hustled off to the pest house.

With the chattering thirty-three disposed of, the staff officers quickly solved the problem of the bombing plane. The chief of the intelligence department, after consulting his records, made a probable guess in three minutes. The only foreign plane within five hundred miles of Shanghai that had been granted a permit to fly at any time during the past two weeks was an American bombing plane. Permission was granted at General Maitland's request for the plane to fly with one passenger, Dr. Saxby, to the Christian missions in Kansu. General Maitland made the request, he declared at the time, because he had learned through private sources that the mission stations were threatened with an epidemic of typhoid. Dr. Saxby wished to fly to Kansu with a supply of antitoxin. As a matter of course the Chinese

granted the request—not that they believed General Maitland for an instant. The story of Saxby's flight over the Chinese lines, and the humane conduct of the Chinese in permitting the flight, would win all the sentimentalists in America to their side at one swoop, and it wouldn't cost a soy bean. They didn't give a damn what Saxby might be up to in Kansu. The staff officers had perfect confidence in their friend the governor.

It was with a smile of regretful satisfaction that the chief of staff now called General Maitland on the telephone and informed him that his bombing plane had met with a serious accident while flying over the trenches of General X. Was anyone injured? Yes, unfortunately; the chief feared that all in the plane had lost their lives. It fell from a great height. The cause of the accident? It was impossible to say. Several soldiers, on sick leave from the victorious army of General X, agreed in reporting that the gasoline tanks must have exploded. The plane suddenly burst into flame and crashed from a height of two thousand feet—some said three thousand. The chief of staff tendered his personal condolences and those of his entire army. He trusted that General Maitland would convey these to the people of America. The accident was but the more tragic in that Dr. Saxby perished in the cause of mercy and humanity.

"Amen!" said General Maitland, banging the receiver back on the hook. "And to think that we sold those damned Chinamen their anti-aircraft guns."

"What are you going to do about it?" his aide asked cynically.

"Do? Watch me and you'll see."

He reached for the private telephone connecting him with the American Air Force in Shanghai. Five minutes later fifty of the fastest bombing planes in the world were roaring over the city on their way to Teng-shan. They were under orders to support Captain Lane and to keep in constant touch with General Maitland by wireless. If necessary they were to cruise back and forth until Lane and the rescued missionaries were safely escorted

through the Chinese lines to Shanghai. And further, at the first hostile demonstration from the Chinese, the latter were to have hell bombed out of them and be raked with machine gun fire from above.

"I guess that's plain enough for our Chinese friends and sympathizers," the general remarked to his aide.

"The planes won't be allowed to carry their radios, you know," the aide archly reminded him.

"Like hell they won't," the general snapped. "If anything happens—no matter what—I'll return the Chinese staff's 'regrets' with thanks."

General Maitland was an impulsive, excitable man. He shouldn't have been a general. He lived with his men, even when they were fighting a hundred and fifty miles away. As the quarter hours dragged by, the general fought hundreds of imaginary battles with the men in his bombing planes, sometimes achieving brilliant victories, but more frequently suffering the humiliation of disastrous defeats. Why the devil didn't they send him some message? Their orders were explicit, and they surely knew him well enough to realize the penalty for disobedience. They were to keep in constant touch with headquarters by radio. Why didn't they? The aide stood silently by, as uneasy as his chief.

At last, an hour and twenty minutes after the planes started, the telephone bell jingled. The general brushed his aide aside and snatched the telephone.

"General Maitland talking, yes?"

"The colonel wants to send a man back, sir."

"What for? He's got his orders! Send him this—"

"The message says he has sent one plane back to report."

"Report what? Speak up! I can't hear."

"The colonel says he has seen something this side of the battlefield you should know about."

"What has he seen?"

"The message didn't say. The colonel thinks you should

know—"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, sir. We lost the rest of the message. The static is quite bad."

The general's jaw set. He anticipated the worst.

"Those damned Chinese are firing on them and bringing them down like partridges."

Till the unauthorized courier from the bombers arrived, the general held himself as tense as a steel spring. The aide wisely held his tongue. This was no time for fatuously making the best of things. Maitland brooded in silence. His impetuosity, he imagined, had precipitated a stupid disaster. What could he tell Congress to pacify it for the loss of fifty of its pet bombing planes? Probably nothing. They would insist that he be demoted and disgraced. Their spiteful anger would hit him alone, for he was responsible for the great "air program"; it was his sensational disclosures that had caused the inspired press to howl for planes, more planes, and yet more planes. And now that the country had given him his precious planes, what had he done with them? Sent fifty of the finest to a certain scrap-heap death. Worse, fifty of the bravest air crews of the world had probably perished with their planes. It never occurred to the general that the courier might be returning to report a devastating victory. Having acted in haste, he could only repent.

When at last the pilot of the returned bomber entered the general's office, Maitland rose slowly, white-faced and silent.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"We don't know," the pilot replied. His face was a greenish white.

"Where are the other planes?"

"Half way to Teng-shan by now."

The general made an instant recovery. He was himself, cold, precise and shrewd.

"Then why aren't you with them?"

The pilot took his life in his hands. He looked his very

superior officer in the eye, spread his legs wide apart, jammed his muscular fists against his belt, and deliberately spat on the Chinese carpet directly in front of the general's feet. Maitland eyed him curiously, but said nothing. It was not the first time he had seen a man crack and reveal his true color under the stress of war.

"General Maitland," the pilot retorted coolly, "this is no time for military etiquette. I've got to do something drastic to make you notice me." The general was noticing. "Courtmartial me if you like after the fight. But the fight ahead of us won't be with the Chinese. Their war is over—at least for a year or two. How can I make you understand?" The general nodded encouragement.

"Their armies aren't there any more," the pilot continued. "We flew all over their bloody battlefield. They've been wiped clean out. And we saw what did it. They're still at it—coming this way. Toward Shanghai. Are you following me? They're rolling over forests and rivers and villages like a flock of crazy steam rollers, getting bigger with every yard they make. And they leave nothing—absolutely nothing— behind them. Like a fool I dropped a bomb on one of the biggest of the green devils just as it rolled into a village. I hit it, all right. It smashed to nothing. Before the dust settled there were fifty new ones, just as big as the first, rolling away from it. Now, you've got to think up a way of stopping them before they roll in on Shanghai."

The general sidled to his desk and unobtrusively pressed a button.

"What do you think they are?" he asked suavely.

"Something the Chinese have invented—some new kind of tank, or a new sort of gas that turns solid and grows in the air when it bursts from the shell. I don't know. But I guess whatever the things are, they can't stop them. Can we? Some of them are the size of five city blocks and taller than skyscrapers."

"I think we can," the general replied soothingly, keeping an

eye on the door, "no matter how big they are. The colonel sent your plane back alone?"

"Yes. He wanted to turn the whole flock back."

"Why didn't he?"

"Well, he said you're hardboiled, and would courtmartial the lot of us for disobeying orders if he did. I volunteered to come back alone. I know you can stop them!"

"You weren't afraid of me, were you?" The general laughed boyishly, like the good fellow he was at bottom—when he wasn't nervous.

"Nor of any other soldier," the pilot retorted. "I've seen what's going to happen to us. These new things put all our equipment out of date. Better warn everybody to take to the water."

The door opened and two tough-looking orderlies entered.

"Arrest this man and take him to the hospital. He's crazy," the general snapped. "He is under arrest till further orders."

At the door the prisoner looked back and laughed.

"The colonel bet me a month's pay you would courtmartial me. Do I win or lose? It's all the same to me. But get the civilians out of the city!"

The aide's insight into human nature was much sharper than the general's. Otherwise he could never have been an aide. The pilot's report, fantastic though it was, somehow had a ring of truth.

"Why not send out a scout plane," he suggested, "to see what has really happened to those armies?"

The general pondered this plan in silence.

"The pilot was drunk, or crazy, or both. That's what we get by taking the riffraff of the colleges into the service. A West Point man doesn't go yellow the first time he sees a little blood."

The aide discreetly held his tongue. Presently the general made up his mind. He telephoned an order to the air force. In two minutes the scout plane was on its way. It never came back,

and to this day its fate is not known. Probably it flew too low and was cut in two by the sudden upthrust of a sword of green crystal. Its continued absence, hour after tenser hour, again grew unendurable. Maitland hazarded the guess that the Chinese had shot it down. On calling up the Chinese chief of staff about three o'clock that afternoon to protest, the aide received a polite assurance that if a mistake had been made by the anti-aircraft gunners the staff would indemnify the United States.

The Chinese staff saw no reason for telling the Americans that their army could not have shot down the scout for the simple reason that General Y had annihilated the forces of General X, and conversely. Not believing the green-devil yarns of the survivors, the Chinese staff concluded that the scout plane had foolishly crashed into a tree. The bewildered staff itself was waiting for solid information. Before the fifty bombers left for Teng-shan, Chinese intelligence officers were on their way to the battlefield to learn exactly how badly their side was cut up. But they did not confide their anxieties to General Maitland's sympathetic ear. They waited a long time for their information. The intelligence officers never reported.

Between four and five o'clock that afternoon two footsore and weary men halted midway on the pass from Kansu to Shensi and sat down to rest before limping on to find a village. Lane scarcely recognized the pass as that down which he and his column had hastened to the rescue of the missionaries. This spur of the mountains was merely shattered by the earthquake, not burst asunder and strewn over the plain as was the range of limestone caverns. Yet even here there was abundant evidence of what nature can do when irritated. And far to the west, gleaming in the sun, two turreted and pinnacled bergs of crystal flashed like cities of emeralds and diamonds above the white wilderness of an utter desolation, which they and their progenitors had created.

"How on earth are we ever going to destroy those mon-

sters?" Lane asked.

"I won't prophesy," Saxby replied, "but I think it will be easy. We must choose a day when the air is perfectly calm. This evening would be ideal. Hark! Do you hear what I do?"

They listened intently to a sound that was not yet audible, feeling rather than hearing it. A distant hum began to drone on the air far to the east.

"Planes!" Lane exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Good old Maitland guessed we were hard pressed from what your pilot told him. Do you see them yet?"

"No. But we shall in a minute." Saxby was frantically collecting sticks and leaves. "They've got to see us. Lend me your revolver. My matches were all ruined in that mudhole."

Before the forty-nine bombers pricked the sky like a fleet of midgets flying in battle formation, the men had a thick pillar of white smoke streaming up in the motionless air. As the midgets grew rapidly from mosquitoes to wasps, then to droning hornets, and finally to a roaring flock of low-flying battle cruisers, the men fanned the smoke with their coats to attract the aviators' attention. They were seen; the fleet shot over them, wheeled, turned again and dived in search of a landing place far down the slope. The one that came down nearest the pass was about three miles away; the farthest fifteen. What looked like smooth ground from above turned out to be either a sticky quagmire or a trap of earthquake fissures. The fleet scattered when it saw what was beneath it. Each pilot was now on his own in spite of the general order to stick together.

Saxby and the captain met the first pilot a little better than half way down the slope.

"What's been happening here?" the pilot bawled.

"Earthquake," Saxby shouted.

No further remarks were exchanged till the panting man joined them.

"Earthquakes," he puffed, "be damned. I meant what are those green things like icebergs standing up out there?"

"A new kind of crystal," Saxby informed him, thinking the indefinite reply sufficient for the moment. To his astonishment the man asked if they were alive.

"Yes. How did you guess?"

"I didn't."

"You have seen them before?"

"Not these. Others just like them. Much bigger."

"Where?" Saxby demanded.

"About a hundred and thirty miles east of Shanghai. Hundreds of them. They were walking all over the woods and trampling down villages like match-boxes. Headed for Shanghai is my guess. Know any thing about them?"

"Lots," Lane cut in. "General Maitland ordered you fellows to come and fetch us?"

"Just about."

"Well, we two are the lot. The rest of my outfit was killed in the earthquake and by what happened afterwards. Maitland sent forty-eight planes too many."

"Our orders were to support you. What's first? Here's the boss coming up the slope now."

"The pilot I sent back," Saxby resumed, "told General Maitland what happened here?"

"No. I guess it must have been your pilot that was shot down by the Chinks a hundred and fifty miles west of Shanghai. Ask the boss."

Saxby guessed the whole story without asking. Details were of no moment. The commander briefly confirmed the pilot's account of the march of the living crystals toward Shanghai.

"One of our crowd flew back to warn the general of what was coming. The man bombed one and made things worse than ever—fifty at least took its place."

"Why didn't you all turn back?" Lane demanded.

"Orders. You know how touchy and how bullheaded Maitland is. Well, where do we go from here?"

"Ask Mr. Saxby. I don't know."

"Shall we take orders from him?"

"Yes. If anyone knows he does. If he doesn't know we may as well fly on as long as the gas lasts. What's first, Saxby?"

"Drop bombs from five thousand feet on those two bergs out there. I'll go up with the pilot. The outcome of our shots will determine what is to be done next. By the way, have you an extra coat with you?"

"You'll be warm enough as you are."

"I guess not," Saxby retorted, stripping his coat and shirt off. "Give me your clothes, Lane. Come on, all of them! I'll drop them when the pilot drops the bombs."

"What's the idea?" the commander asked.

"Plague of some sort," Saxby explained sufficiently. "Our clothes may be infected. You will have to dig up spares for us from your men. We can crawl into the insides of our planes and keep warm somehow." He turned to Lane. "If I have an accident, you tell the rest what happened. Watch the effect of our shots. If they turn out O. K.—you know what I mean—fly back to Shanghai at once. Wait half an hour for all the gas to disperse. When you see Maitland tell him to do this."

He gave the captain the necessary brief instructions and followed the commander down to the plane.

"You can signal somehow to your men?" he asked. The commander replied that they could receive radio messages from his own plane, and Saxby continued. "Then order them to get a thousand feet above the ground and fly around until we finish. Tell them to take their orders from Lane if we come a cropper."

The commander included in his general order a special one for ten of his men to contribute toward clothing the captain while he and Saxby were up. They were to drop their duds from the air. Before the plane took off, Saxby removed his boots and socks, wadded them up with his clothes, and included them with the captain's in the bundle of discards. He then borrowed the pilot's leather coat and wrapped it, leather side in, around the possibly infected clothes. The mechanician donated

an outer coat, the commander a sweater, and Saxby crawled in where it was warm. They were off like a rocket.

"Up as fast as it will climb," Saxby bawled in the pilot's ear. "We must have at least a half an hour of sunshine after the shots. Lend me your glasses."

The desolation beneath them seemed to flatten out at the centre and rise like a vast bowl toward the horizon. At the bottom of the bowl two glittering jewels flashed and sparkled in the sun. Saxby crawled out of his refuge and dropped the bundle of clothes. Then he shook the commander's shoulder and nodded. The plane circled slowly above its mark and laid a big black egg.

The men in the wheeling planes four thousand feet below the attackers let out a shout of involuntary joy at the sheer beauty of the spectacle; a peak of pure crystal burst into a cloud of flashing emerald and diamond and showered down on the plain in a scintillating rain. Saxby, peering down through his field glasses, saw the green ring shoot out from the shattered base and spin over the plain. Before it traveled two miles, it was bleached colorless. In its wake, and for five miles after it became invisible, an army of green pillars leapt from the ground as the gas spread over half submerged splinters from the ruins of the suburbs of Teng-shan and farm-houses. Then, suddenly, as if a gigantic sword in one circling swish had severed the rushing vortex and cut it clean out of space, the invisible gas ceased to devour its prey. Less than twenty feet beyond the outmost pillar of crystal, uprooted trees remained mere uprooted trees. Either the sticks already devoured and transformed to living crystals had absorbed all the gas as it rushed past, like a charcoal filter on common gases, or the continued action of the dying sunlight had destroyed the baleful vitality of the shattered crystal.

"We know how to kill them!" Saxby shouted. "Now for the biggest devil of them all!"

In four minutes the monarch of the wilderness was a ruin. There remained only three rings of squat green pillars to be

destroyed. Bombing them would take too long. By radio the air fleet was ordered to fly low and rake them with machine-gun fire.

As the sun set, the last low dome of green crystal burst into a shower of fragments and vanished. No progeny sprang from this brood. By letting out the life-blood of the giants first, Saxby had robbed the lesser devils of the food by which they might have lived again and bred.

The victors rose from the strangest battlefield in history and soared over the pass in battle formation to consolidate their victory.

15

SHOPPING

HOURS BEFORE THE RETURNING PLANES swooped down upon Shanghai to refuel for the conflict, the grand offensive against the living crystals was well launched. Shortly after the fleet soared over the pass into Shensi the sun set, atmospheric conditions instantly improved, and radio communication with American headquarters in Shanghai became possible. From that moment to the last minute before they landed, the fleet was in constant communication with General Maitland and Admiral Bligh, in command of the battleships in the harbor.

The unanimous testimony of ninety-eight trained experts—the pilots and mechanicians of the bombing planes—was not to be disregarded or pooh-poohed as the sudden evidence of a yellow streak. If General Maitland did not credit the first or the second message from the returning planes, he was forced to believe the twenty-second. They were all so curiously similar, so consistent in an insane way, that the general broke into a profuse perspiration. When to the unanimous testimony of the fliers was added a brief account—by radio—of what Saxby and Lane had seen, with the fact, thrown in for good measure, that the major part of Lane's troops had been wiped out by the living crystals, the truth at last percolated through the general's hard-boiled skepticism. Messages began to flicker back and forth through the twilight.

"Do this, do that," was the tenor of Saxby's curt sparks: "What shall we do next?" that of the general's. Among the orders which Maitland executed like a lamb was a forcible command that he cooperate immediately with the Chinese staffs—of all factions—and with all British, French and other foreign legions within two hundred miles of Shanghai, also with the fleets of all powers.

Like many soldiers of the higher ranks, general Maitland hated that word "cooperate." It always seemed to mean "play the second fiddle, or, if you don't like that, try a tin whistle." Before nine o'clock that evening he was cooperating with Chinese, French, and British at such a high pitch of proficiency that he threatened soon to beat the band. By ten o'clock he had induced all of the oil corporations in China to cooperate with the Chinese and foreign forces to the full limit of their resources. In fact, failing to meet with as prompt and as hearty a response as he had anticipated half an hour earlier, he confiscated their property at one swoop, justifying his high-handed action by that rude phrase "military necessity."

By ten fifteen all the oil trucks within two hundred miles of Shanghai, loaded to capacity, were headed full speed for the battlefield. The hint that any reluctant cooperator might find his tanks bombed in the morning, if his trucks failed to start as ordered, may have had something to do with the remarkable demonstration of efficiency. With a pressing, real job in front of him, Maitland forgot his nerves and showed what he was made of.

Scout planes, swifter than swallows, skimmed through the night to spy out the enemy and report by radio his latest advances. At eleven o'clock it was learned that the nearest of the oncoming green devils was toppling and trundling toward Shanghai over a village less than sixty miles from the city. The main army of crystal giants was some ten miles further back, advancing on a two-hundred-mile front. Behind them, glittering for mile after mile in the moonlight, stretched broad bands of sheer

desolation populated by squat domes and pillars of stationary, living crystal. Flying further west to the human battlefield where the monsters first seized life, the scouts reported in response to a request from Saxby, relayed by Maitland, that the battlefield for miles was a gleaming lake of white mud densely packed with regiments of low domes and stunted pillars. Evidently here, as in Kansu, the lightning growth of the bisexual crystals, with the purple and green bloods, had been attended by strong electrical discharges. The vast uprush of electricity had induced the storm which here, as in Kansu, had severed the purple from the green—or male from female; the males had perished, completely sterilized, in the sunlight, while the females with the green blood had devoured every stick and cotton rag on the battlefield. Then, sinking in the mire they had found fresh food, consumed it, "walked" and toppled from the battlefield, which sloped toward Shanghai, to trundle over woods and villages, breeding a new race independently of the males.

Wherever one of the blind brutes blundered into an obstruction of stone or metal it was instantly shattered, and its yet living blood bathed every fragment of wood in the vicinity with malignant life; from the death of the mother sprang a whole brood of monsters as prolific as she. Where the food was sparse—here and there a few sticks or a handful of straw—the living crystals rooted where they stood, or toppled aimlessly but a few yards to come to equilibrium. Those that ceased to grow were doomed to stand indefinitely, consumed by their own hunger, till some chance wind might blow them a twig or a straw, and possibly start them walking and growing explosively for miles.

If ever an army marched on its belly, this one did. The accident of an exposed root frequently determined the impact of an entire campaign, and more than once the headlong rush of a whole toppling battalion of monsters, any one of which might have crushed a village in its forward lurchings, was halted in abrupt starvation by a strip of gravel two yards wide at the

bottom of a dry river bed. Occasionally one of a host thus suddenly stopped would be urged forward once more by the settling of a single handful of gravel beneath it, and in half an hour the fair countryside beyond the immobile army would be ravaged and as desolate as the territory it had conquered.

With sublime impartiality blind nature did not always destroy. To her the life of plant, animal, or man, and all their laboriously acquired wealth of age-old habits that had fitted them to survive—their beauty, their cunning, their poor treasures—were nothing. In her supreme indifference to them and their fate she stumbled like a drunken imbecile all about them, utterly careless whether she destroyed or did not destroy. The accident of where chance had thrown the food for her latest brutes alone determined her course, and for these youngest and yet most ancient of all living things she had neither hatred nor shadow of mercy. To her it was the same whether she led them to plenty in the destruction of the works of her other spawns, or abandoned them to dumb anguish on the barren stones. She who could not feel; let her creatures suffer for her. She was neither their friend nor their enemy, merely their creator.

It was decided to make a stand on a two-hundred-mile front fifty miles west of Shanghai. By drawing in the lines so close to the city, Maitland and those cooperating with him hoped to have ample time for the deployment of the effective fighting force on the human side. Between this line and the nearest enemy lay a band now less than ten miles wide of thickly settled, heavily wooded, rolling hills and farm lands. Immediately after the oil trucks were despatched, vast quantities of war material of practically all kinds began streaming along all but two of the available roads and railroads toward the front. Tanks trundled and clanked in the van, or clattered along short cuts to the battlefield, crashing fences and farmyards, shanties and pigstys with a serene disregard of everything but haste. The crews inside these rattling fortresses gave such of the terrified Chinese farmers as saw them the scare of their lives. Except for their leather

shoes the men were stark naked. These were the shock troops until the bombing planes should arrive.

The first to reach no man's land were the oil trucks and their supporting troops—Chinese regulars, French and British sailors from the battleships, and American marines. By two o'clock in the morning the counter-attack of the human beings was well launched. A front twenty miles long burst into billowing red flames, and huge, tumbling clouds of velvety soot rolled skyward, blotting out the stars and the moon. The empty oil trucks were already bumping back at top speed along the two open roads to the bases of supplies. Farms, villages and woods, drenched in oil, flared up in one thundering conflagration. The wind rose with outraged violence, hurled itself upon the bellying flames, and swept them volleying back over the enemy's territory. As attack after attack opened along the two-hundred-mile front, the sooty sky flickered and throbbed with dull crimson, till the astonished ships, a hundred miles at sea, thought they were witnessing the Armageddon of all Asia. Where the oil failed, incendiary shells burst and rained down fire, the surging groan of the bombardment rose and fell monotonously over the seaports, getting the timid out of their beds in the cheerless dawn to flee from an imagined invasion of Mongols.

As dawn turned the murky air to the color of dry blood, the returning planes roared over the battlefield on their way to Shanghai, and the first of the tanks clattered into action. Withering flames had bleached the vanguard of the advancing hordes, but had not killed the life in their green cores. As far as the human fighters could see, and towering above the horizon where they had been halted by the starvation, colossal bergs of crystal loomed through the dun air as motionless as an army of Gibraltars.

The crews of the tanks donned their gas masks and charged across the devastated strip in their clattering fortresses. The first was within a hundred yards of crashing its berg when one of the returning planes veered, roared back to the battlefield,

swooped almost to the ground in front of the tank to attract the attention of the crew, and circled it three times before landing. The signal was sufficient; the tank men were not without brains. They brought their clanking monsters to an instant halt.

"Don't attack till the sun is well up!" Saxby shouted, tumbling out of the bomber. "I know what I'm talking about. The wave of gas from a brute the size of this one will travel five miles. Unless there is full sunlight to sterilize the gas before it reaches the edge of the burned area, you men will start the war all over again."

"All right," a voice shouted.

"All right, is it? What's that gas mask of yours made of? There's canvas in it, isn't there?"

The man sheepishly admitted that there was.

"Your attack is off, young man," Saxby snorted. "Hasn't any man at your headquarters a brain in his head? I told you *no cotton, no cellulose.* You got our messages, I know, because you repeated them by radio."

"Can't we try it if we leave these masks behind?"

"That's up to you. The gas may not be poisonous in the usual way."

"Do you think it is?"

"No. It passed over my head; I breathed it by the cubic yard, and I rather liked it. Send a man out of each tank back with the masks, and then you can have your fun. You can't start for an hour yet, anyway. And it won't be fun when you do start."

When the cheer which hailed this verdict died, old Saxby's face was a study of disillusioned pessimism.

"Ten dollars to five cents your rattletrap is stuffed with cotton waste. What do you wipe your machinery with?"

They were guilty. Old Saxby became eloquent on the subject of military efficiency.

"If every wisp of cotton is not out of your tanks before you attack," he concluded sourly, "they will swell up suddenly

and burst like glass bombs. And you'll be inside the glass like flies in amber. Good-bye; I'll see you later—if you use common sense. If not, you are just as well crystallized."

Two hours later, as a reward for their fine night march, the tanks were given the honor of starting the grand assault. In full sunlight, on a front of twenty miles, the ungainly tanks hurled themselves upon the motionless enemy. The air was filled with the brittle din of their ruin, and the minds of the attacking army with the mute agony of their enemies' death.

Half an hour later the entire fleet of planes, refueled and carrying all the ammunition they could lift, soared out over the vast territory conquered by the crystal horde.

All that day, all the following day and into the late afternoon, while blazing oil inundated the bays of the battlefield, the planes bombed the huge bergs that stood motionless to receive their death, and raked the standing regiments of crystal pillars and squat, evil domes with machine-gun fire. As the slaughter of the helpless off-spring of a blind chance increased to its peak, the fliers tried to forget that they had nerves and to remember only that if one kind of life is to survive, another must perish.

The indefinable sense of agony was no illusion. In distant cities, where the rumor of the battle had not yet penetrated, the inhabitants eyed one another suspiciously, apprehensive that their neighbors carried the strange new plague which, they could swear, was feeling with a hand of ice for the marrows of their own bones. Those who had the means stupefied themselves with opium.

Only when the sun set on the final day of the battle and the last green dome of living crystal gave up the crushed thing at its heart, did the echo of that distant pain from a forgotten age become a memory.

About ten months later, Isabel took Tom shopping on a Saturday afternoon. He was to receive a real rabbit—a live one—to solace him for his great loss. For his mother had suddenly

announced that a boy of five should put such childish things as Easter eggs behind him forever. Worse, appeal to his father, carried over his mother's head, had but confirmed the stern decision.

"Is it because of what happened to Hoot with that green egg last year?" Tom persisted as they entered the entrancing shop where guinea-pigs, young bulldogs, kittens, canaries and horned toads were sold.

"I thought you promised me to forget all about Hoot and that green egg," his mother reminded him.

Tom was floored. Diplomacy came to his rescue.

"I can't forget Hoot," he said.

Sorrow for the forbidden eggs vanished in the resplendent vision of an enormous black rabbit with a long face as decorously mournful as a prosperous bishop's.

While Tom was concluding his purchase of the Bishop—Isabel christened him on the spot—old Saxby was on a shopping tour of his own in a romantic quarter of the city not far from the railway station. He was to have Easter breakfast with the Lanes, and he wished to take them some small gift, also to get some decoration for his earthquake cabinets. A flower shop, its windows jammed with waxy Easter lilies swathed in green oiled paper at a dollar a blossom caught his eye for a moment, but he passed on.

Passing a news-stand he unconsciously took in the headlines, but did not stop. Presently, what he had read registered on his absent mind, and he turned back.

HERO BOMBS TWO HUNDRED

the headline yelled. Old Saxby bought a paper, and read how one man in a bombing plane had killed, with a single bomb, two hundred Nicaraguan rebels who were about to slaughter a handful of American marines. He dropped the paper into the nearest "Help Keep Our City Clean" can, wiped his hands, and

marched into a small grocery store.

"'Give me two packages of dyes for Easter eggs," he said to the clerk. "One blue and one yellow."

He put down two dimes, slipped the packages into his pocket, and started for the interurban station, his shopping forgotten.

The problem in his mind absorbed him. Was it by more than a sheer accident that Yang succeeded in concocting the specific compound that caused silicon dioxide to take on at least the semblance of life? Almost certainly not. Yet, of all the billions of unstable compounds existing for infinitesimal fractions of a second in the almost instantaneous rush to stability, only a few, perhaps only one, under the exact conditions necessary, had the power of making silicon colloids self-perpetuating and self-feeding. What was the probability of hitting this one chance. Practically nil, unless one had genius to read the slight variations of innumerable failures, and from their mazes discern the one, infinitely crooked, path to the hidden goal.

Yang had had such genius. Saxby knew that he himself lacked it. Yet, if he were lucky, he might stumble upon the fortunate combination of circumstances before he died. With reasonable care of his health he might live to be a hundred. That would give him nearly forty years. But what if, after all, it was not the green dye that was the essential "priming" of the explosion, but some rarer accident? Isabel told him the first afternoon they talked together that the waterglass which she had thrown away was foul with milky blue spots and was "stringy." Were those evil threads and blue spots the secret principle of the life in the living crystals? If so, how many millions of years must elapse before chance would again turn up the lucky number which called them into being? In the absence of luck in either event—green dye or stringy waterglass —it might well be millions of millions of years before another crystal relearned the forgotten secret of life.

This much he saw by the simple rules of arithmetic and the iron laws of chance, laws less flexible than any ever devised

by man. Yet, he might live forty years, and in one year thousands of routine experiments can be carried out. Only one need be the lucky one.

Mathematics does not tell us everything. Saxby realized this. The rest of his problem was the hardest, and here arithmetic failed him. Which way was better? The present order of nature, where the finest flower of evolution dies or inflicts death to be free to grow, or the older order, where brute killed brute blindly, without purpose and without the sanction of reason. Was either way better than the other? What had ethics to do with a problem that was a mere puzzle in the laws of chance? How escape it? Was not a revolution to achieve liberty and a less brutish life—the sort of thing these wretched Nicaraguans were always pulling off—a contradiction in itself?

"At any rate," Saxby muttered to a helpless lamp-post, "those crystals didn't say they were killing one another for the victims' good. Fundamentally they were lesser humbugs than we are. Red-blooded men; blue blood; fists across the sea; green-blooded crystals; true blood; which shall it be? I'll try for the green! Forty years . . . I'll do it!"

He savagely kicked the lamp-post and discovered to his dismay that he was lost. A poker-faced Chinaman stood in the doorway of his shop smoking a long pipe.

"Is this Chinatown?" Saxby asked, rather fatuously.

The imperturbable merchant nodded, a slight Chinese nod. It was Chinatown, the very heart of it. Saxby stood staring at the dingy shop window. Unlike an American shop window, the Chinese merchant's gave no indication of what the proprietor sold. It was bare of everything except one small bowl of pebbles and water in which a single Chinese lily bloomed in white purity.

"How much for the lily? Bowl and all?"

"Him not for sale."

Saxby fished out a twenty-dollar bill and flashed it in the Chinaman's face.

"I guess you'll sell it for twenty dollars."

Without a word the merchant reached for the lily, bowl and all, handed it to Saxby, and pocketed the bill in silence.

As he walked away, carrying his purchase tenderly, old Saxby fumbled in his pocket. He found the two packets of dyes, the blue and the yellow.

With a gesture of shame he tossed them into the gutter.

"White Lily!"

THE END